# INVASION OF HELLGARD

# Invasion of Hellgard

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# Chapter 1

# Abyss

The massive transport ship vibrated with a low, constant hum, a deep thrumming sensation that resonated through the soles of its diverse array of passengers. Within its cavernous interior, soldiers, their faces etched with an unreadable stoicism, sat interspersed with lawyers. These legal professionals were hunched over their digital case files, their expressions a mix of concentration and weariness. Amidst them were Sol Union Corp lab technicians, their new, futuristic uniforms looking stiff and uncomfortable, their bodies visibly trembling with a combination of fear and unfamiliarity. Each group, though dis-

tinct in their purpose, shared the common bond of this journey, propelled forward into an uncertain future.

A solitary figure, William Thompson, sat apart from the rest, a palpable aura of brooding quietude surrounding him. His gaze remained fixed on the training videos flickering across the surface of his personal tablet, the harsh glow illuminating his intense features. Taller than the average man, his broad shoulders seemed to carry an unspoken burden, a silent testament to a life lived, replete with experiences that had shaped him into the man he was today. The weight of his past seemed to press down on him, visible in the slight slump of his shoulders and the faraway look in his eyes.

Ten years prior, a vastly different William had reclined in the worn comfort of an old, rope-strung hammock. The gentle, rhythmic lapping of the lakeside against the shore had provided a serene backdrop to his quiet con-

tentment. The golden afternoon sun had dappled through the leaves of the overarching trees, painting shifting patterns on the ground. It was in this idyllic scene that Anna, his beloved wife, had approached him, her eyes brimming with an overflowing love that mirrored his own. Their young son, Flynn, a spirited boy of nine, had been playfully shouting, "Fucking tear! Fucking tear!" his innocent voice echoing with mock ferocity as he pretended to be a monstrous creature, his small hands clawing at the air. Laughter had filled the air, a melody of pure joy that had resonated deeply within William's soul.

Later, in the hushed tranquility of the master bedroom of their suburban home, a profound sense of isolation had settled upon William. He found himself alone, his fingers tightly clutching a small, unassuming card. Its message, stark and unsettling in its simplicity, had pierced through the domestic calm: "The Demons Must Never Win. If You Need Help, Call," followed by a suicide hot-

line number. The words had been a cold splash of water, jarring him from the warmth of his memories, leaving him with a chilling premonition that he couldn't quite shake.

Days passed, and in the bright, sunlit yard of their suburban home, Flynn played with Anna, his joyful laughter ringing out across the perfectly manicured grass. The scene was one of domestic bliss, a stark contrast to the growing unease in William's heart. His car then pulled into the driveway, its tires crunching softly on the gravel. William emerged, a small, wicker carrier in his hand, containing a new family pet – a tiny, fluffy bunny named Daisy. Flynn, upon seeing his father, instantly abandoned his game, running towards him with an irrepressible bubbling excitement. William knelt, bringing himself to his son's level, and with a gentle, almost melancholic smile, told him, "Daisy's gonna help look after you when I'm gone." Anna, sensing the unspoken weight in his words, stepped forward and kissed her hus-

band, a tender, lingering farewell that felt heavy with an unspoken understanding. The sun continued to shine, but a shadow had begun to fall over their otherwise perfect lives.

TThe broadcast studio hummed with a nervous energy, the air thick with anticipation as the heavy man in the impeccably tailored suit leaned into the microphone. His voice, usually a smooth instrument of persuasion, now resonated with a raw, guttural outrage, a rumbling cascade of accusation that filled every corner of the studio and spilled out to his waiting television audience. "The Sol Union Corp is sacrificing its own people to *dae monsters* for power!" His words, unpolished and thundering, were delivered with the conviction of a prophet of doom. "I'm not speaking metaphor, here, I mean it! My sources on the inside tell me people are disappearing, people are scared, and going berserk. There's voices and glowing eyes!" He paused, a visible effort to clear the sudden constriction in his throat, and took a long

gulp of water from the glass on his desk. Calmer now, his voice dropped, a conspiratorial whisper that nonetheless filled the studio, amplified and carried to millions. “Listen folks. I know many of you think I’ve gone off the deep end, but it is no secret for almost two hundred years that our world has been advanced from the work of genuine evil sons-a-bitches. The Sol Union Corp is no different...” A chill settled over the audience, a collective shiver of unease as the implications of his words began to sink in.

Across the city, as the first pale fingers of dawn stretched across the sky, a different kind of murmur filled the air at the military base. The air was thick with the bittersweet scent of goodbyes, a poignant mix of hope and apprehension. Anna and Flynn, a bit older now, their faces etched with a familiar sorrow, stood among the throngs of families, waving with a forced cheerfulness. Flynn, ever the sensitive one, clutched his beloved pet Daisy, finding a strange, comforting so-

lace in the soft fur against his cheek. William, already in his crisp, new uniform, a symbol of his newfound commitment, blew kisses to his family as he boarded the transport plane, a fleeting image of their faces imprinted on his mind before he turned to join his unit, disappearing into the belly of the enormous aircraft.

Later, on an alien world bathed in the strange, bioluminescent glow of an unfamiliar night, William navigated the thick, unfamiliar terrain, his boots crunching on strange flora that pulsed with an eerie, rhythmic light. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and something indefinable, yet distinctly alien. He reached a vantage point just outside a human settlement, a cluster of hastily constructed shelters nestled amongst towering, serpentine trees. His unit fanned out beside him, their hushed movements almost imperceptible in the alien darkness. His commanding officer, an older man whose eyes had seen too much, whose face was a

roadmap of countless battles, approached. A heavy silence hung in the air, broken only by the chirping of unseen creatures. Then, the officer pulled out a radio, its static hiss a jarring intrusion. “Clear them out!” the officer barked into the comms, his voice devoid of emotion, a cold, hard command that sliced through the night.

A cold dread seized William, a paralyzing fear that froze him to the bone. Panic flared, a white-hot spark igniting in his chest, threatening to consume him. He lunged, a sudden, desperate blur of motion, tackling his commanding officer with an unexpected ferocity. Fists flew, a merciless rain of blows, each impact echoing in the silent night. Other soldiers in his unit, stunned by the sudden, inexplicable outburst, moved to intervene, their weapons raising. But William, fueled by a primal fury, a desperate need to protect the innocent, fought them off, a whirlwind of desperation and righteous anger. He aimed his rifle, the familiar weight a comfort in his

shaking hands, and the alien night was shattered by the staccato rhythm of gunfire as a few members of his own unit fell, their cries silenced by the terrible choice he had made.

Later, the chaos had subsided, replaced by a grim silence. William, battered and bruised, but with a strange, defiant glint in his eyes, was subdued. He was secured in a makeshift cage by the remaining soldiers of his unit, their faces a mixture of confusion, anger, and a reluctant respect. Then, with a jarring lurch, he was loaded onto a transport ship, its engines humming a low, mournful tune. His alien captivity had begun, a solitary journey into an unknown future.

Days later, the sharp, final sound of a gavel echoed through a courtroom, a reverberating shock that rippled through the gathered spectators. The verdict was in, and it was devastating.

Back in the recording studio, the conspiracy host sat at his desk, his hand clapped over his mouth, his face a mask of profound disbelief as he read a transcript that had just been handed to him. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, his voice dumbfounded, his usual bravado replaced by a bewildered awe, "as I sit before you today, I am still trying to process what has literally just come in before airing." He took a deep, steadying breath, his eyes scanning the words before him, trying to comprehend the enormity of the news. "Our sources have just sent in information regarding the widely publicized court-martial hearing of Corporal William Thompson. As many of you know, Thompson is being accused of treason, among nearly a dozen other counts." The broadcast flickered, a momentary glitch, a fleeting tremor in the transmission. "Our sources have told us the reason for Thompson's actions was due to an order to execute a small, uncategorized humanoid population." The screen behind him shifted, displaying a haunting image of the alien village, now in

ruins, a testament to the brutality that had almost occurred. “The video you are seeing here is believed to be the aftermath of the attack. It is believed the locals managed to evacuate, after hearing Corporal Thompson open fire on his fellow soldiers to stop the onslaught.” A collective gasp swept through the studio, a wave of shock and dawning realization. The truth, in all its horrifying glory, was finally out.”

Outside the courthouse, in the futuristic city street, a crowd of protesters screamed, their voices violent and raw. A woman, her face contorted with rage, was being interviewed by a news crew. “William Thompson is nothing but a psychopathic monster and a traitor,” she shrieked, her words swallowed by the roar of the crowd. “Men like him need to be extinct!”

Outside the courthouse, the futuristic city street pulsed with a violent roar. A tide of protesters, their faces contorted, screamed themselves hoarse. A woman, her features

twisted into a mask of pure fury, thrust her face into a news camera. “William Thompson is nothing but a psychopathic monster and a traitor,” she shrieked, her words swallowed by the enraged chorus. “Men like him need to be extinct!”

The quiet suburban home offered no sanctuary. In the dim light of the bedroom, William hunched at the side of the bed, a broken figure. Anna, her eyes swimming with sorrow, tried to comfort him, clutching a framed photo of William and Flynn. “Like Father, Like Son,” read the cheerful caption, a cruel mockery of the present. “You can get through this, hun,” Anna murmured, her voice raw. “You were already found innocent, just please don’t give in.”

The bedroom door creaked open, and a young, worried Flynn poked his head into the crack. William looked up, a fragile smile gracing his lips. “Hey bud, come here!”

Flynn's face brightened, and he started to approach his father. Then, a man appeared at the bedroom window, smashing it with a pistol. William exploded into action, a primal instinct taking over. Anna screamed, grabbing Flynn and fleeing. William tackled the intruder, throwing him against the wall with a force that shattered a large weapons safe, revealing a double-barrel shotgun. William snatched it up, leveling the barrel at the intruder.

"You fucking bastard!" William roared.

"William, NO!" Anna shrieked from the hallway, Flynn clutched tightly in her arms.

The next morning, the suburban street was unnervingly silent. William stood alone, the crisp air doing little to soothe the turmoil in his chest as he read Anna's goodbye letter.

*William,*

*I know that this road has been hard on you; but seeing who you've become after what happened scares me. I know you'd never intentionally hurt me or Flynn, but with the house broken into and the people stalking us, it's just not safe!*

Tears blurred the words, the crushing weight of his guilt pressing down. He continued to read, the letter a testament to the chasm opening between them.

*I don't want Flynn to come to harm because of this. When you attacked that man, I know in my heart you were just trying to protect us! But I can't take the risk! I'm taking Flynn to my parents for the weekend and to think things over. It may be time for us to go our separate ways.*

William started back towards the house, the paper trembling in his hands.

*If it does come to it, you have my word that I will not keep Flynn away from you and I won't speak ill of you with him. The boy needs his fa-*

*ther, and you need him just as much to remind you of the amazing human being you are inside. Please know that I am not doing this because I have fallen out of love with you. Not after everything we've been through. Forever and always, Anna*

In the recording studio, the conspiracy host sat behind his desk, a rare note of sadness in his demeanor. "Sometimes in this world, the good people who try to do the right thing are attacked... or worse." He held up a grainy, sepia-toned image: a WWII-era wanted poster, featuring a grim-faced military man labeled "Benjamin Thompson." Then two more, from the 1970s, depicting "Trouble Twins" Jess and Soph Thompson.

"Just like what Nazi sympathizers tried to do to US Army Ranger Captain Benjamin Joseph Thompson and his family..." The image shifted to an 1980s photograph of a radio newscaster. "And with what some believe led to the mysterious disappearance of heroic

newscaster and whistleblower Arthur Thompson." The screen changed again, showing a 2020s missing person's poster, an eccentric tycoon type. "And the strange stories of leading space industry mogul Willie Arthur Thompson back in 2023. William Thompson is yet another man whose life was tested and thrown to the side by corruption..."

Later, in the futuristic city street, bathed in the glow of neon, William stood by a mailbox, a letter clutched in his hand. He dropped it in, then loaded a bag into the back of a sleek, futuristic truck.

*Anna,*

*I do not blame you for running away. I would too if I was in your shoes. Flynn doesn't deserve this life and at this time I am not sure if I can escape it with everything that has happened.*

He slid into the truck, his gaze lingering on his family home one last time.

*Whatever you decide, I will honor it to the best of my ability. I've left a few things behind for you to decide what to do with as you see fit. They're mainly just some old clothes and some other hand-me-downs for Flynn. The boy is gonna grow out of what he has faster than we realize.*

A wry chuckle escaped him as he started the engine, pulling away from the curb.

*I've also left my old shotgun. I'm not quite sure what to do with it just yet as I was planning on giving it to Flynn once he was old enough. It probably scares the hell out of you, and I won't judge you otherwise. Whatever it is you decide to do, just be careful and do not be afraid to call me if you or Flynn need me. You know I'll always come.*

The bleak apartment offered little comfort. William sat on an old couch, scanning the finality of divorce papers. His memory seemingly fading into his present day as a ping on his electronic tablet broke the silence and his concentration. A video message from Flynn, older now, a young man. William opened it, a genuine smile softening his features.

The video flickered to life, showing a university hallway. Flynn, his face close to the camera, nervously adjusted his phone, fidgeting with his hair. “Hey dad!” he began, a strained cheerfulness in his voice. “Sorry about not responding quicker, school’s just been hammering on me, haha.” He looked down, took a deep breath, and met the camera again. “I, uh, heard from ma about your new job. Security on Mars, huh? I do hope it works out for you. Just watch out for yourself, alright? I know it’s probably just a bunch of wacko conspiracy theories but that Sol Union Corp just seems off. But if anybody

can handle if something goes sideways, it's you, dad. I'm proud of you."

A woman's voice called from the background, Vanessa Franklin, Flynn's girlfriend. "Flynn, babe, come on we're gonna be late!"

Flynn grinned at the camera. "Just a sec, I'm just recording a video message for my dad!" He took a quick breath. "And, I know it might be a while before I hear from you again, no worries. But, uh... that was Vanessa and... things are getting pretty serious..." He glanced around, as if checking if Vanessa was within earshot. "I know it sounds crazy, but, I've been thinking about asking her to marry me. No, I haven't told Mom yet. It's just something I wanted to talk to you about first. So, if you get a second, got any advice? Like I said, no rush, I know you got things to settle into." Flynn started walking down the hallway. "Anyway, I got to get going. Again, good luck fighting off Martians!" He finished with a heartfelt, "I love you, Dad."

William chuckled at his son's message. The man sitting next to him, Private First Class Thomas Frandsen, nudged him. "Sorry, just hate these long flights without much to do. Was that your boy?"

William sighed, "Yep, he's all grown up. Apparently has himself a little girlfriend."

Thomas smiled. "He seems like a good kid. You should be proud!"

William's gaze hardened for a moment, a flicker of his old annoyance at casual conversation. "He is. He had a good mom there to keep him in line and not turn out too much like me."

Thomas chuckled, seemingly oblivious to the tension. "I'm sorry if I'm bugging you. My lady is expecting and told me she was gonna tell me the gender when I got back."

The tension drained from William, replaced by a weary sigh. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just nervous about starting a new job. Congrats on the kid.”

“What brings you to the abyss?” Thomas asked, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

William glanced over. “Seemed like it was a decent payday.”

“I hear you man.” Thomas paused, a sudden realization dawning on his face. “My apologies, Corporal. I didn’t quite recognize you.”

William stared at Thomas, a moment of confusion, then recognition. “Relax. That was a lifetime ago.”

Thomas nodded, extending his hand. “Again, my apologies. My name is Thomas. Thomas Frandsen.”

William gripped Thomas's hand, a firm handshake. "Corporal William Thompson, though I already suppose you knew that."

Thomas seemed unsure what to say next, scratching his head. "So, what is it that brings you to Mars?"

Thomas smiled, thankful for the ice-breaker. "I'm just getting back from a protection detail; escorting a some wacked out scientist out to the Sol Union Corp on Pluto. Let me tell you something. I know they say those science types can be a bit screwy in the head, but if you ever get assigned to Melvin Bertonia..." Thomas looked around, as if what he was about to say next could get him in trouble. "Run like Hell, something ain't right about him. See if they'll send you to Venus or something. That base may be old scrap from the second world war, but maybe you'll find a good looking woman from there!"

William shook his head, a faint smile playing on his lips. “So, if you’re gonna be eager to talk my ear off on this ride... Can you tell me any ‘forbidden’ knowledge corporate won’t tell an FNG?”

Thomas nodded his head. “Honest? There’s something weird going on. I don’t know what or why, but there’s a lot of people spooked and want to see Mars blown to bits.”

A buzzer filled the air, and a light near the pilots flickered from green to red. “Attention. We are preparing for descent. Please fasten your seatbelts.”

The hum of the transport ship's engines thrummed through the deck plates, a constant, low growl that did little to soothe the nerves of its passengers. Every tremor, every groan of the stressed hull, sent a fresh jolt of anxiety through the crew. Inside the cramped cabin, a tense silence had fallen, broken only

by the occasional clink of gear or the rustle of uniforms.

"Almost touchdown," Thomas announced, his voice a little strained, the usual easygoing lilt replaced by a professional clipped tone. His eyes, usually crinkling at the corners with amusement, were sharp and focused as he glanced at William, who sat beside him. "You ready?"

William, a knot of unease tightening in his stomach, managed a tight nod. The atmosphere in the ship felt thick with anticipation, almost suffocating. "As much as I can be," he replied, his voice a little rough. "Anything else I need to know before we step onto this... glorious new assignment?" He tried for a touch of levity, but it fell flat.

Thomas offered a small, almost imperceptible shrug. "Just don't let Sergeant Kelso gnaw your ass too hard. He gives all the new meat a hard time till they're beaten tender

to his liking. Standard procedure for him." A flicker of something, perhaps a shared understanding of past ordeals, passed between them.

William huffed, a quick, dismissive sound that held a hint of weary resignation. "So was my last C.O.," he muttered under his breath, the words barely audible over the ship's continued rumble. The memory, a lingering phantom, tightened the knot in his gut.

Suddenly, a blinding, searing orange glow erupted from the ship's viewports, bathing the interior in an incandescent light. The raw, untamed power of atmospheric re-entry was on full display. Everyone on board squinted, their hands instinctively flying up to shield their eyes from the brutal glare, until the ship's advanced windows, with a subtle whir of unseen mechanisms, tinted themselves, dimming the intense light to a manageable amber. William's heart, already a frantic drum against his ribs, began to race even faster, his

breathing becoming shallow and rapid. The abrupt flash of light, the violent shaking of the ship, the distant roar of the engines – it was all a sudden, searing trigger. Memories of his last mission, the one that had torn his life apart, now flooded his mind, a relentless tide of fear and chaos. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to push the intrusive images away, trying to regain control. The transport ship, now a roaring beast fighting against the planet's gravity, began to slow its descent, the faint crackle of radio transmissions confirming that the ship was cleared to land.

"All the fancy gadgets they come up with these days," Thomas quipped, a forced cheerfulness in his voice, attempting to lighten the mood as he saw William's distress. "Yet we still feel like we're gonna shoot a hole through the surface of Mars just trying to get home to the missus!" He nudged William gently with his elbow.

William managed a small laugh, a hollow, reedy sound that held no genuine amusement. He appreciated Thomas's attempt, but the lingering tendrils of his trauma clung to him.

"Tell you what," Thomas continued, undeterred, a hopeful note in his voice, "you and I somehow manage to get the same day off, how about we blow off some steam in the commons area? There's a decent holo-arcade and a pretty good synth-ale on tap."

William tapped Thomas on the side, a gesture of camaraderie, a silent acceptance of the offer. "Whatever man. You watch yourself." The unspoken sentiment hung in the air: *We'll see if we even make it through this.*

With a final, bone-jarring jerk, the transport ship landed, the muffled thud echoing through the cabin as it settled into the docking bay of the Sol Union Corp. The low hum of the engines ceased, replaced by the hiss of

depressurizing seals and the distant clamor of the spaceport. Almost immediately, people began to unbuckle themselves, a collective sigh of relief rippling through the cabin, and started to grab their bags from the overhead compartments, eager to disembark. Thomas gave one last, encouraging wave to William, a quick grin flashing across his face, before disappearing into the throng of departing passengers. William remained seated for a moment longer, the last one to leave, the weight of the new assignment, and the ghosts of the old, pressing down on him. He took a deep breath, steeling himself, and finally rose to face whatever awaited him beyond the ramp.

# Chapter 2

# New Start

William stepped out of the transport ship, the Martian air a strange, thin kiss on his face. He observed his new surroundings, the sprawling complex of the Sol Union Corp stretching under a sky the color of rust. Another soldier approached, his steps purposeful.

"Corporal Thompson?" the man asked, his voice crisp.

William sighed. "Yeah, that's me." He offered his hand reluctantly, then followed through as the soldier extended his own.

"I've been asked by Sergeant Kelso to be your escort," the soldier continued. "Normally, you'd get a day to get acclimated, but there's an urgent matter at hand he needs your assistance with."

"What's going on?" William asked, a familiar knot of concern tightening in his gut.

The soldier gestured for them to walk towards the sprawling base. "It's better if we walk and talk. Sergeant isn't exactly a patient man."

The hums of distant transport ships and the brief, overlapping conversations of men and women in Sol Union Corp uniforms echoed through the air, audible but barely intelligible. William clutched his bag and followed behind the soldier, who, with a fluid motion, pulled a rifle from a specialized compartment on his armor. The weapon seemed to magically expand, growing from a compact

form into its full, lethal size in the soldier's hands.

"How the hell did you do that?" William asked, genuinely shocked and impressed despite himself.

The soldier's smile was knowing, a glint in his eye that spoke of privileged access. "The Sol Union Corp has a very nice collection of toys we get to play with," he explained, his voice a low rumble. "And if they like you enough, you even get to help make them." He continued walking, his movements fluid and efficient, and with a practiced ease, reached into a compartment at his side. He withdrew a small bag of pretzels, offering them with a casual gesture. "Hungry?"

William, still captivated by the seamless way the pretzels had materialized, accepted them. The illusion of depth and physical space was so utterly convincing, it was hard

to believe the bag hadn't been physically present.

"Even the most basic armor here is equipped with I.F. Storage Packs," the soldier continued, chewing on a pretzel. "I.F. stands for 'Infinite Field.' Practically lets you carry a shopping mall without weighing you down. Each item you store gets tagged by the system, making it easy to find and bring out on command, all controlled by a neural network." He tapped the back of his head with a finger. "Some choose to stick with the helmet for the neural interface, but after a while, if you're trusted, they let you get an implant if you feel it would be easier. The tech is pretty sophisticated, almost indistinguishable from a natural thought. Just do yourself a favor and try not to let your fingers get too close to the activation point when you're retrieving something, unless you want to lose one." He chuckled, a dry, humorless sound that sent a shiver down William's spine.

Their walk ended at a pair of imposing, reinforced metal doors, prominently labeled "ARRIVALS" in bold, black letters.

"Step through here for your checkup," the soldier instructed, his tone suddenly more official. Without another word, he veered off, disappearing through another door marked "STAFF ONLY," leaving William alone in the sterile corridor.

William took a deep breath, the lingering, recycled air from the transport shuttle still clinging to his clothes and hair. He hesitated for a moment, then pushed through the sliding metal doors.

The scent of antiseptic, sharp and clinical, immediately stung his nostrils, mixed with a faint, metallic tang he couldn't quite place. Before him, a massive, curved glass window offered a panoramic view into the admission office. Within, futuristic body scanners hummed with a low, almost imperceptible

electrical current, their sleek forms hinting at advanced diagnostics.

"Morning!" a voice boomed, startling William, who instinctively flinched. The voice belonged to a broad-shouldered man with a shaved head, his face a mask of weary efficiency. "Let's get this over with. Just stand on one of the red boxes and stand still. The more you move, the longer this takes."

William walked to one of the glowing red squares etched into the polished floor, aligning his feet precisely with the diagram. He set his worn canvas bag down beside him, the material rustling softly against the pristine, almost gleaming tile. The scanning machine whirred to life with a deeper hum, casting a faint, crimson glow over him, tracing his outline with invisible beams.

"Alright, looks good..." the Scan Tech mumbled, his gaze fixed on a monitor hidden from William's view.

A sudden, faint radio call interrupted the calm, a burst of static crackling through the air. “Fuck, not again,” a different soldier muttered under his breath, his voice laced with frustration. He hurried to the Scan Tech’s microphone, hitting a button. Bits of the radio transmission, now amplified, crackled through the mic, sounding like a desperate struggle.

“Thompson, I’ve been dispatched to another location. Head to the front desk to check in...” The words were abruptly cut off by the guttural roar of a man echoing through the radio, followed by the distinct sound of a struggle. The soldier, his face grim, rushed out of the room, the heavy door slamming shut behind him with a resounding thud that vibrated through the floor.

“I swear it’s just getting worse...” the Scan Tech grumbled, shaking his head slowly, a weary resignation etched on his features.

Above the sliding doors leading into the front offices, a green light illuminated, casting a soft glow. “Just head on through,” the Scan Tech said, his voice flat, devoid of any warmth. “The front desk will tell you where you need to be.”

William nodded, a sense of unease settling over him. He retrieved his bag, the worn canvas feeling heavier than before, and walked through the now-open sliding metal doors.

He entered a spacious reception area, the air slightly warmer, a welcome video playing on a large, wall-mounted monitor. Its smooth, synthesized voice extolled the virtues and opportunities offered by the Sol Union Corp, a stark contrast to the urgency he had just witnessed. William was still observing his new surroundings, taking in the gleaming surfaces and subdued lighting, when a woman’s

voice cut through the low hum of the environment. “Corporal Thompson?”

A woman with kind eyes and a neat bun, whose nameplate identified her as Marianne Fagin, sat at the reception desk. She waved him over with a gentle hand. He approached her, the low murmur of voices echoing through the vast, impersonal space, each one a whisper of untold stories.

"Apologies," Marianne said, her voice softer than the Scan Tech’s. "You can set your bag there; it'll be sent to your quarters."

William set his bag down, a sigh escaping him. "I'm told you'll be the one to direct me to Sergeant Kelso?"

The receptionist looked at her monitor as another Sol Union Corp scientist walked by, offering her a wave. "Morning, Dr. Hall," Marianne said, nodding. She turned back to William. "Yes, Kelso has noted for you to be

sent directly to mission command. Just take this keycard."

Marianne reached into her desk, pulling out a red ID card. She pressed it to a device hooked to her computer, and William's name and image appeared on the digital display of the keycard. "Don't lose this," she warned. "Our systems will automatically update to give you access to your authorized zones." She handed him the keycard.

William discovered a clip and attached it to his shirt. "Any questions?" Marianne asked.

"Just one," William said. "Say things go to Hell and it becomes an all-hands-on-deck situation, what happens with my access?"

"I see you've heard the rumors." Marianne sighed, glancing over her shoulder to see if any management was within earshot before looking back at William.

"Yes, a Private Frandsen told me there's some people who want to see a hole shot through the surface of Mars..."

Marianne shook her head, a subtle smirk playing on her lips. Her hand instinctively rubbed against her stomach, a gesture that reminded William of his ex-wife when she was pregnant with Flynn. He smiled at the memory.

"He just doesn't know when to shut up, does he?" Marianne whispered, then composed herself. "Standard Procedure dictates that if there is an emergency deemed a level 5, all access ways are to be unrestricted to allow personnel to evacuate their station. Militia identification will be given authorization to override accessways for situations deemed a level 3 and above. Corporate felt that given the sometimes unpredictable nature of Sol Union Corp operations, it would be best to ensure militia would not be restricted."

William nodded. "Good to know." He pointed down a hallway, where among a series of signs, one read "Militia Command." "So, down that way, I assume?"

Marianne glanced in the direction William was pointing. Thomas Frandsen was in the hallway, looking back at Marianne with a loving smile before walking away. A brief red tint blossomed on Marianne's face.

"Yes," she said, her voice a little brighter. "Just follow the signs, and they'll take you straight to militia command. If you get lost, militia stationed along your route have been notified to assist."

William nodded and took a deep breath, still nervous about starting the new job. "Thank you. And, uh, good luck with the baby."

Marianne seemed shocked that William noticed, but a gentle blush spread across her cheeks as she smiled. "Thank you, sir. How did you know I was pregnant?"

"I have a boy myself, all grown up... but you just reminded me of his mother." William playfully winked at Marianne as another woman approached from behind him. The receptionist handed her an orange strap to secure to William's bag, directing her where to drop it off.

William walked down the hallway, taking note of his surroundings. Whispers already started filling the air from others walking the halls.

William strolled through the sterile corridors of the Int. Sol Union Corp, the muted hum of machinery a constant companion to the purposeful footsteps of soldiers and scientists. The air, thick with the scent of ozone and recycled air, pressed in, a testament to

the colossal effort required to sustain life on a world scarred by an unknown cataclysm. He paused at the entrance to the Commons area, a space designed for brief respite, where three soldiers slumped in chairs, attempting to decompress from the ever-present pressures of their duties.

A muted news broadcast flickered on a television screen mounted in the kitchen section of the Commons. A crisp, corporate voice filled the air. "Sol Union Corp Corporate Offices would like to issue a statement regarding a recent string of rumors pertaining to unusual activity throughout all arms of the corporation."

The screen displayed a male newscaster, his face a picture of placid professionalism, while a cartoon ghost danced mischievously over a Martian landscape behind him. "Due to internal concerns brought forth by Sol Union Corp staff," the newscaster continued, "Corporate has sent a team of researchers to in-

vestigate the various claims. Reports have ranged from employees feeling unsafe in their working conditions, to violent outbursts, and even reports of ghosts!" A ripple of manufactured laughter escaped the newscaster's lips, betraying a hint of disbelief at the absurdity of his own report.

"While the Sol Union Corp denies many of the claims made by popular conspiracy programs," he stated, his voice regaining its corporate gravitas, "...internal investigations have already located, and dismissed, those who leaked sensitive company information to these programs. The Sol Union Corp would like to remind all staff that free and confidential resources to aid your physical and mental health are open, and encouraged, by all."

The news segued into another story, but William's attention had already drifted to two soldiers at a nearby table.

"Hear that!" Soldier #2 chuckled, nudging his companion. "The corporate boys are sending out ghostbusters!"

Soldier #3 shivered, a faint tremor running through him. "I don't know why you're laughing, there's something going on, and even I'm getting the creeps. Have you been down by Delta labs lately?"

"We're stuck in one of the most advanced science labs on a planet that was wiped by some kind of cataclysm that no one still has a clue about!" Soldier #2 scoffed. "That's creepy by itself! People are just getting worked up over nothing."

"But have you been down by Delta?" Soldier #3 insisted, his voice barely a whisper.

A throat cleared at the entrance to the Commons. "At least I ain't afraid of no ghosts!"

William turned to find Taylor Hall, a tablet clutched to his side.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Soldier #2 asked, a hint of suspicion in his tone.

"I'm Dr. Taylor Hall," the newcomer announced, his voice clipped and authoritative, "one of the 'ghostbusters' the Sol Union Corp has dispatched to assess claims behind increasing disturbances."

"I thought the Sol Union Corp was writing it all off as ghost stories by that broadcast that just played?" William Thompson interjected, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Hall sighed, adjusting his glasses, his gaze falling upon Thompson's red ID card. "The official statement was crafted to try settling the public's nerves due to concerns from the Sol Union Corp's business partners, Corporal Thompson. But the truth is, there is corpo-

rate reflects those concerns, tracing the worst of the reports to this base."

William nodded slowly.

"Now, if you'll come with me," Hall continued, his voice firm, "we both need to get to Sergeant Kelso ASAP."

"Wait, why you?" William asked, a flicker of apprehension in his eyes.

"Your assignment involves a missing scientist, one of the heads of this facility," Hall said sternly. "It is believed that part of his vital research may be connected to the future of this corporation."

Hall turned and strode out of the Commons, his tablet still tucked to his side.

"Yes, sir," William replied, falling into step behind him.

Soldier #2 and Soldier #3 stared in disbelief as Hall and Thompson vanished from the Commons, their destination the Militia Command.

# Chapter 3

# Fire

The central hub of the Militia Command buzzed with a low, persistent hum, a symphony of purpose and tension. Sol Union Corp staff, their faces etched with concentration, were hunched over their individual computer stations, the cool, sterile glow of the screens painting their features in a mosaic of light and shadow. Beyond the expansive, reinforced window, the stark, unforgiving landscape of Mars stretched out, a desolate canvas of fiery red that faded into a hazy, indistinct horizon.

Looming above the diligent workers, Sergeant Kelso, a man whose age was hinted at by the subtle lines around his eyes, stood like a sentinel. His cybernetic armor, a marvel of advanced engineering, seemed to thrum with a contained, barely perceptible power. He surveyed the newly arrived personnel with an almost palpable current of annoyance, a familiar irritation flickering in his weary eyes.

"You damn FNGs can't ever hurry your asses up, can you?" Kelso grumbled, his voice a low, gravelly rasp that seemed to vibrate with suppressed frustration.

Thompson, a figure of military precision, responded with a crisp, practiced salute, his movements sharp and efficient. Hall, on the other hand, ever the less formal of the two, extended a hand in an open, welcoming gesture. Kelso, however, dismissed the offering with a dismissive glance, his gaze locking onto Hall with an almost predatory intensity.

"Dr. Hall, there's a station set up for you to hold hands with the newbie," Kelso remarked, a biting hint of sarcasm lacing his tone, a subtle jab at Hall's apparent lack of urgency. "The technician over there will help you link your tablet to the system mainframe."

As if on cue, a woman technician, her demeanor radiating efficiency and purpose, materialized at Kelso's side. "Right this way, Dr. Hall," she stated, her voice clear and direct.

Hall offered a brief, silent nod of acknowledgment, a subtle gesture of understanding, and followed her to an empty computer station. Without further ado, they immediately began the complex process of linking his personal tablet to the intricate network of the mainframe. With Hall occupied, Kelso's attention, as sharp and unwavering as a laser, snapped back to Thompson.

"Here's the situation," he began, his voice dropping to a more serious, almost confidential register, the humor and sarcasm draining away to reveal a steely resolve. He cast a quick, assessing glance at Hall, then returned his piercing gaze to Thompson. "As I'm sure you've heard by now, a head Sol Union Corp scientist, Dr. Raymond, has gone missing. Last known sighting was near Delta Labs. It is believed that he was heading towards a decommissioned comms facility and was showing signs of a psychotic break."

Kelso paused, taking a deep, measured breath, the brief silence punctuated only by the subtle hum of the command center. "It's a bit of a trip to get there. You'll have to find your way to sublevel seven and get access through maintenance shafts. I've read your file, the court martial aside, you were a damn good soldier. You are to find him, get him to the nearest infirmary for evaluation. Do not hurt him, unless he gives you no choice."

Thompson absorbed the order, his expression unreadable, a flicker of something enigmatic dancing in his eyes, a brief glimpse into the thoughts swirling beneath his composed exterior. "Yes, sir," he responded, his voice firm and unwavering.

"Now, before you get to go galavanting across the base, your first stop is the armory," Kelso continued, his voice regaining a touch of its earlier gruffness. "In the event you have to use force, it'll be better that you have at least something to stand your ground. The Sol Union Corp being the contractor it is, they sometimes like to use the militia as their guinea pigs... Don't be a dumbass and shoot yourself with them..."

A sudden, sharp crackle from Kelso's radio cut him off mid-sentence, an abrupt intrusion into the burgeoning conversation.

"Sergeant Kelso, Dr. Carmack has requested your presence in Weapons R&D –

over," a disembodied voice reported through the static, a sense of urgency underlying the clipped professionalism.

"It's about time they got that thing ready..." Kelso muttered under his breath, a faint hint of anticipation in his voice as he pressed a button near his collar, acknowledging the call. "I'm on my way."

He shifted his weight to his left, taking a brief, almost imperceptible breath, a subtle preparation for his next movement, before looking back at Thompson, his gaze once again sharp and direct. He grunted, a sound that served as a clear, unmistakable dismissal. "Get to the elevator shaft you passed on your way here. That'll lead you to the armory. Get suited up, find Raymond, and you better be beaten to a pulp before coming to me about any excuses of screwing around!"

William, his posture rigid and impeccable, saluted Sergeant Kelso once more, his stance that of a proper, disciplined soldier.

"Dismissed."

Towards another part of the base, unbeknownst to all, a sinister plot was getting ready to unfold on the Martian moon, Deimos, utilized as a “classified operations sector” of the Sol Union Corp Martian base.

The air in the Sol Union Corp's Deimos Classified Operations meeting room hung heavy, thick with the metallic tang of unspoken tension. Around the gleaming silver table, a small team of scientists fidgeted, their hushed whispers abruptly cut short as Dr. Alicia Neurton entered. Each step she took was accompanied by the faint whir and click of her futuristic exoskeleton, a marvel of engineering that aided her scoliosis and allowed her to move with an almost unnatural precision. A stark callousness permeated the

room, a chill that seemed to emanate from every corner, save for one lone scientist who still clung to a flicker of humanity.

"Afternoon all," Dr. Neurton's voice, though clear, held a brittle edge, "let's get through with this meeting quickly as we have another expedition scheduled..." She placed a small, sleek device on the table, its surface glowing with an internal light. A touch, and a three-dimensional hologram shimmered to life above it: an immense structure, undeniably ancient, spiraling into the simulated air.

"Now, according to the translations provided by Dr. Gerald..." Neurton continued, her gaze fixed on the ethereal edifice, "This structure may contain valuable artifacts pertaining to the native life in Helgard... We are to expect heavy resistance from the natives, as well as other interested parties..."

A male scientist, his face a mask of barely concealed derision, cleared his throat. "This

is insane!" he scoffed, his voice dripping with mockery. "Who else would be interested in even touching that place!"

Dr. Neurton's eyes narrowed, her face momentarily squishing in annoyance. "Ever since we started conducting these expeditions," Scientist #2 pressed on, emboldened, "strange things have been happening in this base... Yet no one is seeing the connection? How long before something goes wrong? Isn't that why they shipped off Dr. Melvin Bertonia to God-forsaken Pluto and started binding up the teleportation experiments in Delta labs?!"

The other scientists, sensing the storm brewing within Dr. Neurton, fell silent. Then, a collective murmur, a low, unsettling drone, began to emanate from their throats.

*Kill Him*, a disembodied whisper, chillingly distinct, echoed in the sudden quiet.

Dr. Neurton walked behind Scientist #2, her movements fluid and silent. She placed her left hand on his shoulder, her touch unsettlingly cold. Scientist #2 flinched, shrinking under her gaze. "My apologies, Dr. Neurton..." he stammered, intimidated.

"Your concerns are noted," she replied, her voice dangerously calm. "Bertonia's sudden reassignment would have been problematic had we not prepared for such an occasion."

The murmuring from the remaining scientists grew louder, morphing into a rhythmic, guttural chanting.

"And you're right," Dr. Neurton continued, her voice rising above the eerie chorus, "the cause of our work here has upset some... but that is the course of evolution!"

With a swift, almost imperceptible motion, Dr. Neurton produced a silver-white athame, its surface engraved with glowing or-

ange symbols. In a horrifyingly fluid movement, she slit Scientist #2's throat. The chanting from the other scientists intensified, a feverish crescendo as Scientist #2 gurgled, blood blossoming from the wound, his life slowly ebbing away.

"And you will feel it shortly..." Dr. Neurton murmured, her eyes gleaming with a terrifying light. She ran a hand through the flowing blood, letting it gather in her palm. Then, with a devilish smile, she brought her hand to her lips and drank.

Scientist #2's body went limp, his life extinguished. The ritualistic chanting ceased, leaving an echoing silence in its wake.

"The Hell Wave will arrive soon," Dr. Neurton announced, her voice resonating with a chilling authority. "Shall we ready the door?"

Moments later, William found himself in the sub-level armory, ready to receive his or-

ders from Sergeant Kelso. Inside, a technician, similarly armored, was fitting William with a cybernetic suit. The metallic hum of servos filled the air.

"This armor is standard issue for all Sol Union Corp militia," the Armory Tech rumbled from behind his helmet. "But don't get too excited; this group doesn't take kindly to insurance liabilities."

William smirked as he donned the helmet. Instantly, digital displays illuminated his visor, a kaleidoscope of information flickering to life.

"The helmet provides oxygen support for surface excursions," the Tech continued, his voice now slightly muffled by the internal comms. "Those displays will assist you daily: weapons status, maps, inventory, company announcements, and all the other company jargon. Any questions?"

William took a moment, absorbing the flood of new information. "These storage compartments I keep hearing about—how do I avoid losing a finger?"

The Armory Tech picked up a standard plasma rifle. He expertly checked the safety before offering it to William. "It's much easier than you think. Hold this rifle and imagine it's a beautiful woman you're snapping mental pictures of..."

William rolled his eyes, a smile playing on his lips at the subtle joke. He took the rifle, holding it up. A subtle click echoed in his helmet. "Now what?"

"Now, just hold the rifle to your side and let the system work its magic..."

William lowered the rifle. His hand jerked back in surprise as the I.F. Storage Pack activated, the rifle shrinking and being absorbed with an almost imperceptible shimmer.

"See, just like that!" the Armory Tech exclaimed. "Now just imagine that rifle again to pull it out."

William followed the instructions, and just as quickly, the rifle materialized back in his hand. "Now that's awesome."

"Isn't it? One of the few perks of a Sol Union Corp paycheck is access to their new toys! Now, in case you find yourself in a shithole, there are magnetic spots on the front and back of your armor to mount your weapons." The technician produced a futuristic plasma pistol and attached it to William's armor, just above his right leg.

"The science boys really thought of everything, didn't they?" William mused.

"Trust me, it blew my mind to see them actually listen to what us leathernecks had to

say..." The Tech paused, then asked, "Before I send you skipping off, any questions?"

"Just one," William said, "what's with the focus on plasma rounds?"

The armory tech chuckled. "Like I said, the brainiacs at weapons labs actually listen to what we have to say. The basic idea for plasma weapons is to solve situations where someone might run out of bullets. And, if you're stuck on an alien planet, getting more supplies to you might take a while. So why not have a gun that can recharge itself?"

The armory technician walked over to a computer screen, scanning the monitor. "You're heading to the old communications building, looking for Raymond? Good luck." He shook his head.

"So I assume the rumors about psychotic breaks are true?" William asked, a hint of unease in his voice.

The armor tech looked towards William, his expression serious. "And you're diving in the mudpits... so again... good luck."

Dr. Taylor Hall watched the sprawling base from his tablet, the blue dot of William Thompson finally flickering to life on the digital map. "About time you got online, Thompson," he muttered, just as a stark red warning flashed across the screen: "Unusual power fluctuations near the teleportation bays by Delta labs."

"What the hell?" Hall jammed an earbud in, the tiny wire disappearing behind his ear, and radioed Thompson.

Deep in Sublevel One, William navigated the labyrinthine corridors, rifle held at the ready. Static crackled in his helmet, a constant companion as he searched for the communication facility Dr. Raymond was supposedly heading for. "Thompson, this is

Taylor Hall, do you read me?" Hall's voice, tinny through the comms, cut through the white noise.

William paused, fumbling for the right response. "Yeah, I read. You gonna whisper sweet nothings in my ear or do you have something for me?"

"Potentially," Hall replied, a slight hesitation in his voice. "There is a major power fluctuation near your location."

The overhead lights around William flickered in sync with Hall's words, casting eerie shadows that danced around uneasy Sol Union Corp scientists hurrying about their duties. "What's causing it?" William asked, his voice betraying a hint of unease. He reached an elevator, its brushed metal doors gleaming under the unstable lighting.

"I don't know," Hall admitted. "For some reason, I can't get access."

"Out of curiosity," William continued, stepping into the elevator and pressing the button for Sublevel Seven, "is there a map somewhere in this damn helmet so I know where I'm going?"

A beat of silence. "I'm in the elevator now, heading to sublevel..." William trailed off, his eyes widening. He thought he saw something to his left, two glowing red eyes staring back at him from the dark corner of the elevator car. He squinted, clenching his jaw, and looked again. Only two faint red indicator lights blinked back.

"Thompson? You still there?" Hall's voice was edged with concern.

"Yes, I'm still here," William replied, trying to sound nonchalant. "I just thought I saw something."

"That's what I was afraid of..." Hall's transmission began to break up, replaced by a surge of static.

"Hall? Hall!" William yelled, frustration lacing his tone, his fists clenching as the elevator doors groaned open.

Sublevel Seven. The lights here were steady, a welcome relief. As William stepped out, a Sol Union Corp scientist, hurrying past, jumped back with a yelp at the sight of William's rifle. "Jesus Christ! Don't you gunners know by now how all on edge we are down here?!" the scientist yelled, clutching his chest.

William lowered his rifle. "Apologies sir, I was sent to look for Dr. Raymond. Have you seen him through here?"

The scientist visibly relaxed. "Raymond? Yeah, I saw him. It looked like the stress of the place was getting to him."

"Did he look like he was going to hurt himself? Say anything?"

"Actually, it was weird, but he kept saying something about 'she needs to be stopped'. A couple of us tried to talk to him but he was so hellbent on whatever he was doing that he didn't seem to notice us!"

William tried to press for more details, but a metallic crash and a chorus of screams from the infirmary interrupted him. Rifle at the ready, William charged towards the sounds.

He burst through the infirmary doors, a chaotic scene unfolding before him. Five medical staff struggled to restrain a violent patient, who thrashed wildly against their efforts. "Can we get him sedated, people?!" a nurse yelled, her voice strained.

"He's already got enough tranquilizers to kill an elephant!" another cried out.

William rushed to assist, his rifle still in hand. The aggressive patient broke free, lunging at William, but a swift, brutal strike with the butt of his plasma rifle sent the man sprawling, unconscious.

The staff, momentarily stunned by William's sudden aggression, took a collective breath. One of the nurses quickly moved to a series of cabinets, returning with titanium restraints. "Finally..." she murmured, securing the unconscious patient's wrists and ankles. As she worked, William noticed patches of brown, leathery skin on the patient.

"What happened to him?" William asked.

Nurse #1 looked up, still trying to calm her racing heart. "Possible radiation exposure... at least that's why his skin looks the way it does. But the behavior... that was sud-

den..." She paused, then, "Are you Corporal Thompson?"

William mounted his rifle to the magnetic clip on the back of his armor. "I guess you already know why I'm down here."

"Yes, Sergeant Kelso sent out a notice about you looking for Raymond due to concerns for his mental state..."

"That's about it. You have something to tell me about that?"

Nurse #1's expression grew serious. "I have reason to believe Raymond isn't having a psychotic episode... from what we saw he was too coherent. Something scared him, bad."

"Do you know how I find him? My equipment doesn't seem to function down here."

"It's not the gear..." Nurse #2 interjected, exchanging a tense glance with Nurse #1.

Nurse #1 looked back at William. "If Raymond is heading to the old comm facility, you'll have to take the maintenance paths through the next two sublevels to get to it..."

William grabbed his rifle, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Thank you. Hopefully, I won't have to bring you another belligerent patient..." He turned and ran out of the infirmary, heading for a nearby stairwell.

# Chapter 4

# Flames

Frustration, a bitter tang in his mouth, gnawed at Taylor Hall. The technical glitches, relentless and infuriating, multiplied with each passing second, severing his already strained communication with William. He could almost feel the connection fraying, a vital lifeline being slowly choked off. His fingers, usually so steady and precise, drummed an anxious, accelerating rhythm on the smooth surface of his tablet. Each tap echoed the frantic beat of his own heart, a rising panic he fought to suppress. Just as he was about to hurl the device across the room in a fit of pique, a new message popped up,

its sudden appearance arresting his attention.

The sender's name was initially obscured, a digital ghost, a mystery to be unveiled later as Samael Hendricks. It was a name that twisted something deep within Taylor, a name he hadn't heard in years, a name that belonged to a past he had desperately tried to bury. The subject line, stark and simple, yet loaded with unspoken history, read: "Hello, Old Friend."

A jolt, like a surge of electricity, went through Taylor. The innocuous phrase, so seemingly benign, hit him with the force of a physical blow. He rose from his station, the bustling hum of the command center suddenly fading into a distant murmur. Tablet clutched tightly in his hand, he sought refuge, a quiet corner where he could read in privacy, away from the prying eyes and the cacophony of urgent voices. He found a secluded alcove near a rarely used emergency

exit, its cold, metallic surface a stark contrast to the growing warmth of dread in his stomach.

The message unfolded, each word a slow, deliberate twist of the knife:

*Hello, Dr. Hall, it certainly has been a while. I have just been informed that our time may be limited. It seems that our worst fears are about to become true...*

Taylor froze. The words resonated with a chilling familiarity, an echo of nightmares he thought he had long since vanquished. He knew, instinctively, with a certainty that transcended logic, what Samael was referring to. His breath hitched, a ragged gasp caught in his throat. His chest tightened, a vise clamping down on his lungs, as he fought to regain control, to force air into his burning chest, to focus his racing thoughts. With trembling hands, hands that betrayed the professional calm he usually exuded, he

raised the tablet to reply. The screen flickered, a reflection of the tremor in his grip.

*Why did you ever involve me in this?* he typed, the accusation thick in the air around him, a silent scream of betrayal. The words practically vibrated with the depth of his resentment, a lifetime of regret distilled into a single, damning question.

Another message appeared almost instantly, a reply that seemed to mock the very notion of time, again from Samael Hendricks. The speed of the response was unnerving, as if Samael had been waiting, anticipating his question.

*You are among the few I trusted, your legacy helped define all that is here...*

Under his breath, a low growl, animalistic and raw, escaped Taylor's lips. "You son of a bitch..." The words were laced with venom, a testament to the profound anger that now

coursed through his veins, displacing the fear and confusion. He gripped the tablet tighter, his knuckles white, the urge to crush it almost overwhelming. The weight of his past, of the choices he had made, suddenly felt unbearable, crushing him under its oppressive presence.

While Hall was still processing the impossible, grappling with the sudden, terrifying resurgence of a buried past, William was already deep within the tight, metallic guts of the maintenance halls. The air in these forgotten corridors was thick with the faint, almost metallic scent of ozone and the stale, recycled air that barely stirred. His eyes, keen and focused, scanned the smudged, cryptic signs that adorned the grimy walls, each one a riddle to be solved. He moved with a quiet urgency, his footsteps echoing softly in the enclosed space, searching for the elusive path, the hidden artery that would lead him to the comms facility, the only hope of re-es-

tablishing contact and understanding the unfolding catastrophe.

"Come to Mars," he muttered, a sarcastic rasp in his voice, the words tasting like ash in his dry mouth. "We'll get together, have a few laughs, it'll be fun..." The biting irony was almost a physical thing, a phantom limb that ached with the memory of promises made and broken, of dreams that had withered and died under the unforgiving Martian sun. He remembered the recruitment videos, bright and saccharine, promising a new frontier, a fresh start. All lies, of course. Just another rock to bleed on.

A burst of static from his radio, a sharp, unwelcome intrusion into the oppressive silence, then Sergeant Kelso's gruff voice cut through the air. "Thompson, do you read me? I heard about your actions in the infirmary..."

"Yes, Sergeant," William replied, a slight edge to his tone, a subtle defiance that only

someone who had spent too long in the company of hard men could detect. “Someone was giving the nurses a hard time, and I knocked him asleep.” He didn’t elaborate, didn’t need to. Kelso knew. Everyone knew. When order broke down, someone had to pick up the pieces, even if it meant getting a little messy.

“The nurses send their thanks,” Kelso said, a hint of amusement, almost a chuckle, in his voice. It was a rare sound from the hardened veteran, a testament to the fact that even in this hellhole, small acts of decency resonated. “Have you found Raymond yet?”

“No sir, I’m moving through maintenance tunnels in sublevel nine to get to the comms facility.” The tunnels were a labyrinth of rusted pipes and exposed wires, smelling of dust and stale air, a stark contrast to the sterile, impersonal corridors of the main base. He preferred the tunnels. Less pretense.

"Good to hear you follow someone's orders. Double-time it!" Kelso's voice hardened, the amusement gone, replaced by an urgent authority. "Dr. Hall has identified some potential anomalies, and we'll need all hands on this!" Anomalies. The word hung in the air, heavy with unspoken dread. On Mars, anomalies rarely meant anything good.

"Yes sir." The transmission cut out, leaving William alone with the relentless hum of the ventilation system, a mechanical heartbeat in the cold, unfeeling belly of the facility. He sighed, the sound escaping his lips in a weary puff of air. "So much for an easy first day..." He ran a hand over his tired eyes, the red dust of Mars ingrained in his skin, a permanent reminder of his new, unwelcome reality.

A loud hiss from behind him made him jump, heart thudding against his ribs like a trapped bird. He collected himself, straining to hear over the drone of the fans. A subtle voice, barely a whisper at first, echoed

through the cramped hall, growing clearer as he moved towards it. It was Dr. Raymond. The sound was fragmented, desperate, almost animalistic.

"Why! Why! Why!" The shouts were frantic, raw with terror, each syllable ripped from a throat that had seen too much, understood too little.

"Dr. Raymond?" William yelled back, his voice cutting through the rising panic, a desperate attempt to anchor himself, and Raymond, in reality. "Are you okay, sir?" He rushed towards the sound, his boots clanging on the metallic grates, hearing the impossible—someone scrambling up a metallic stairwell at an inhumane speed, a sound that defied logic, defying the limitations of the human body.

"Dr. Raymond! Dr. Raymond!" His pleas were swallowed by the echoing confines of the tunnels.

Raymond's rants faded behind a metallic slam, a jarring finality that reverberated through the tunnel. William followed, taking the stairs two at a time, his muscles screaming in protest, emerging into the cold, silent space of the decommissioned comms facility. The air in here was even colder, thick with the silence of abandonment. Dust motes danced in the sparse beams of light filtering through grimy vents.

Dr. Raymond was there, hunched over a series of ancient, dust-covered computers, his fingers flying across the keyboards with a manic intensity, a frantic energy radiating from him like a palpable heat. He was clearly disturbed, a man on the edge, teetering on the precipice of something terrifying. His hair was disheveled, sweat plastered to his forehead, and his eyes, wide and bloodshot, darted around the room as if pursued by unseen demons.

William burst in, the suddenness of his entry causing Raymond to flinch, but only for a moment. He tried to comprehend the scene, the chaos of the room, the desperate, almost deranged focus of the scientist.

"I need to get this out!" Raymond shrieked, his voice laced with desperation, cracking with the strain of his efforts. "Petersen better answer! Maybe Cloud can tell them! Someone needs to stop her! Goddammit Hendricks, why did you trust that woman?! I told you something was not right about her! We should have..." His words dissolved into a choked sob, his fingers still flying across the keys, as if the answers to his frantic questions lay buried within the obsolete machines.

"Dr. Raymond," William interrupted, his voice firm but laced with genuine concern, a lifeline thrown into a raging sea. "Are you okay?"

Raymond recoiled from William, a guttural scream escaping him. He scrambled back to the computers, gasping, his eyes frantically searching until they landed on a prosthetic finger he'd dropped. He quickly reattached it.

"Whoever you are," Raymond rasped, his eyes wild, "I have no time for this. Just let whoever sent you know that I am okay. I cannot leave!"

William, confused, asked, "Sir, are you okay? What's going on here?"

"Just, please!" Raymond screamed, a desperate plea in his voice. "Don't distract me!"

The computers hummed to life. Raymond's fingers flew across the keyboard, a blur as he typed codes to access a communication relay. The system lagged, a frustrating slowness that made Raymond curse under his breath.

"Sir," William tried again, his voice softer, "I just started today and have no clue what has been happening in this base. What is bothering you?"

Raymond let out a sudden, nervous laugh. "There's no way for you to possibly understand. How could you? I just wanted to build... I just wanted to make life better for so many people. I put so much of my life here..."

A tremor shook the base, rattling its very foundations. William looked around, bewildered. Raymond froze, terror etched on his face.

"Must be a quake..." William mumbled.

"That's not a quake!" Raymond cried.

The computer screen flickered, displaying a security feed of the base. A message prompt appeared, and Raymond's fingers flew across the keyboard.

"To all Sol Union Corp Personnel," he typed, his voice a strained whisper, "I am writing you to request immediate military assistance to the Sol Union Corp Mars facility... A research station has been compromised, and a rogue scientist by the name of Alicia Neurton is about to orchestrate an invasion... Please... send help or use the classified Armored Terran Resistance project Horde Annihilation Gun-1210993 to destroy..."

Another tremor, stronger this time, shook the base. William struggled to keep his balance while Dr. Raymond propped himself against the computer terminal, his body trembling. Raymond then retrieved a futuristic hard drive from his coat and, with a sudden, forceful motion, shoved it into a port on William's armor—a port designed for experimental software upgrades.

"What the hell did you put into me?" William demanded, his body tensing, a prickle of approaching danger crawling up his spine.

Raymond sighed, a ragged sound. "You want to know what's happening?" William nodded. "The devil? He's real. I know. I built his cage!"

A third, bone-rattling tremor rocked the base, nearly knocking both William and Raymond off their feet. The very foundations groaned under the immense strain. William's radio screeched to life, then a monstrous, deep laughter, guttural and chilling, filled the comms facility, seeming to emanate from the very walls themselves. Emergency protocols, triggered by the escalating chaos, brought up security feeds on the main computer terminal. The screens flickered to life, displaying scenes of absolute carnage in various parts of the base. Screams of terror, frantic shouts, and the sharp crackle of gunfire echoed

throughout the facility, creeping through the reinforced walls and into the comms center, a chilling symphony of despair.

"We're too late!" Raymond cried, his voice a raw, desperate whisper laced with unadulterated panic. His eyes darted wildly across the screens, his face pale with shock.

William, transfixed, stared at the horrific scenes of carnage. The incessant screaming, amplified by the comms system, triggered a profound and debilitating wave of PTSD. His breathing became ragged and shallow, his body began to shake uncontrollably, a tremor that originated deep within his core, as his pulse skyrocketed, thrumming a frantic beat against his temples.

"We need to get out of here!" Raymond shouted, his voice now a desperate plea, cutting through William's spiraling terror. He grabbed William's arm, his grip surprisingly strong.

Just then, a mysterious, ethereal red mist began to fill the room, swirling with an ominous glow near William and Dr. Raymond. It pulsed with a faint, malevolent energy. William, his instincts screaming, noticed it instantly and recoiled, jumping away from its insidious tendrils. Dr. Raymond, however, in his desperate attempt to flee the encroaching vapor, inadvertently inhaled a lungful of the crimson mist.

"Doc!" William yelled, his voice laced with gut-wrenching worry and a dawning horror. "Doc, cover your face!"

It was too late. Dr. Raymond began to convulse violently, his body shaking uncontrollably, his limbs flailing as if caught in an unseen current. His skin, once healthy, drained of all color, becoming a cadaverous grey as if all his body fat simply melted away in a matter of seconds. He retched violently, releasing all bodily fluids and a sickening

gush of blood onto the floor. William watched in horrified disbelief, utterly paralyzed, as Dr. Raymond's grotesque transformation from human to a grotesque, shambling zombie unfolded before his very eyes. The former human, now a twisted parody of his former self, lunged at William with an animalistic might, a guttural growl rumbling in its chest, forcing William to open fire. The zombified Dr. Raymond succumbed quickly to William's plasma shots, disintegrating into a putrid cloud of dust, the high-pitched ringing sound of the weapon echoing eerily through the now silent room.

Realizing the terrifying and immediate intensity of the situation, the sheer, unimaginable horror that had descended upon them, William bolted for the exit, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"Son of a bitch, son of a bitch, son of a bitch!" he gasped, the words tumbling out in ragged, desperate gasps as he sprinted.

He yanked frantically at the door, but it wouldn't budge, sealed shut by a sudden power failure or a failing system. He swiped his keycard repeatedly, but nothing. In a burst of pure, unadulterated frustration and adrenaline-fueled desperation, he slammed his fist into the door, managing to shatter a glass panel with a resounding crash. With a primal roar and brute strength born of fear, he forced the door open, splintering the frame, and scrambled towards the maintenance stairs that had led him to this living nightmare.

Simultaneously, in the command center, Dr. Hall paced with a frantic energy, the oppressive silence of the room a stark contrast to the frantic pounding in his chest. Each tick of the clock on the illuminated console seemed to amplify his growing dread. "Thompson! Thompson! Do you read?!" His voice, usually steady and authoritative, cracked with each unanswered call, each si-

lence amplifying his dread and pushing him closer to the brink of panic. He gripped the edge of a data terminal, his knuckles white, the flickering indicators on the screen offering no solace, only a relentless display of an unresponsive signal.

A technician, the same woman who had been with him earlier, a quiet and competent presence named Anya Sharma, approached. Her hand settled gently on his shoulder, a small, comforting gesture that momentarily pierced through his frantic thoughts. “Dr. Hall, is everything okay?” Her concern, though softly spoken, was a small, fragile anchor in the rising tide of his mounting anxiety, a brief respite from the relentless assault of his fears.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to compose himself, to force a semblance of control onto his rapidly unraveling composure. "Yes, I’m sure everything is alright... thank you." The lie tasted like ash in his

mouth, acrid and bitter, a futile attempt to reassure both her and himself. His gaze darted around the command center, a flurry of worried faces and hushed whispers confirming his worst suspicions.

Then, the base shuddered again, a low, grinding tremor that was unmistakably not a normal marsquake. It was deeper, more violent, a tremor that seemed to come from the very core of the planet itself, a guttural groan from the depths of Mars. Eyes in the room widened in collective horror, a choked gasp rippling through the tense, charged air, the low hum of the machinery momentarily drowned out by the rising fear.

"Please tell me that you have had issues with marsquakes?" He demanded, his gaze fixed intensely on Anya, searching for any sign of reassurance, any shred of normalcy that could explain this terrifying anomaly.

She shook her head, her face pale with fear, the blood drained from her cheeks. “No, there were a couple tremors from the old dig sites to the north... but nothing like this!” Her voice was barely a whisper, a stark contrast to the growing roar of the shaking. The air crackled with an unseen energy, the metallic tang of fear thick on their tongues.

The tremor hit again, stronger this time, a violent lurch that threw some personnel off their feet, sending chairs scraping across the floor and equipment clattering. The command center plunged into momentary darkness as the computers flickered and died, their screens going black, the vital data streams abruptly cut off. Alarms began to blare, a piercing, discordant symphony of warning that assaulted their ears, an almost physical manifestation of the unfolding disaster.

“We need to evacuate the facility!” Hall shouted, his voice barely audible above the

rising chaos and the blaring alarms, the weight of the unfolding disaster pressing down on him, a crushing burden. The automated emergency lights, a sickly red, began to pulse, painting the panicked faces of the crew in a hellish glow.

A third tremor slammed into them, rattling bones and teeth, a shockwave that vibrated through the very core of their beings. Computers glitched wildly, screens erupting in static, displaying fractured images and garbled data before dying completely. Then, a sound that froze the blood in their veins, a sound that defied all logic and scientific understanding: deep, monstrous laughter echoing through the very foundations of the base, a resonant, guttural sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"What the hell was that?!" Anya whispered, her eyes wide with terror, her voice

barely a breath, her hand unconsciously gripping Hall's arm.

Hall met her gaze, the intensity in his posture speaking volumes, a grim realization dawning in his eyes. "Hell..." he uttered, the single word loaded with a terrifying prophecy.

Alarms began to blare, painting the room in a pulsating red glow, the urgent flashes reflecting in the wide, terrified eyes of the personnel. An automated voice, synthesized and unnervingly calm, cut through the cacophony, cold and precise. "This is a level five emergency, all personnel evacuate immediately to the nearest launch bay or emergency bunker! This is not a drill! All Sol Union Corp militia commence order 9-7-3 of evacuation protocol." The clinical detachment of the voice only intensified the horror of the situation.

Doorways burst open, and staff surged out, a panicked flood of bodies driven by primal fear, a desperate scramble for survival. Hall was among the first, propelled by a desperate instinct, running for his life when the animalistic roars and the shattering glass reached him, sounds of utter carnage erupting from the outer corridors, confirming their worst fears. The screams began, distant at first, then closer, chilling them to the bone.

The invasion had commenced.

# Chapter 5

# Inferno

William's heavy boots slapped against the cold, metallic floor of the sub-level maintenance halls, the rhythmic thud a counterpoint to the chaotic symphony of alarms blaring around him. The rifle, a familiar weight, was gripped so tightly his knuckles were white. But even the roar of the klaxons couldn't drown out the screams now filtering through his radio, a raw, terrified chorus that sent a shiver down his spine.

"Dr. Hall! Sergeant Kelso! Does anybody read me?" he yelled into the comms, his voice

strained and cracking. “This is Corporal Thompson, what in the fuck is going on?!”

Only static answered him, followed by the frantic, garbled shouts of overwhelmed soldiers, a cacophony of fear and chaos that painted a chilling picture of whatever nightmare was unfolding above. He pressed the comms button again, his voice now a desperate plea. “Can anyone hear me? This is Corporal William Thompson!” Still, no clear response, just the horrifying sounds of a battle lost.

Ahead, through the pulsating red glow of emergency lights, two figures descended the maintenance stairs. Helmeted, clad in combat armor, their rifles swept the area with chilling precision, seemingly searching for something – or someone. William’s heart leaped. Hope, a fragile thing in this madness, surged through him. He waved frantically, relief flooding his voice. “Hey! About time I

found somebody! What the hell is going on up there?"

His words died in his throat. Without a sound, the two soldiers raised their rifles, their movements unnervingly synchronized. Muzzle flashes erupted, spitting fire into the darkened hall. William reacted on instinct, a lifetime of training kicking in. A few searing shots grazed his arm as he dodged, scrambling for cover behind a nearby doorway, the sharp scent of burnt ozone filling the air. He returned fire, the reports of his rifle echoing deafeningly, the muzzle flashes briefly illuminating the advancing figures. But they didn't flinch, didn't hesitate. They continued their relentless charge, barely reacting to his shots, their unswerving resolve unsettling him more than the gunfire itself.

William knew he was outmatched in a straight firefight. He waited, gripping his plasma pistol, its familiar hum a small comfort. As they drew closer, their forms becom-

ing clearer in the flickering light, he unleashed a volley of searing plasma bolts. The superheated energy sizzled through the air, striking the first soldier with a grotesque splash of light and smoke. Before the second could react, William rushed them, a surge of raw adrenaline fueling his movements. He fired again, a plasma bolt slamming into one soldier's neck, a horrifying sizzle and crackle accompanying the impact. Before the other could recover from the sudden attack, William closed the distance, his hand gripping the soldier's neck, twisting with a sickening snap.

He took a moment, leaning against the cold metal wall, to process the brutal encounter. The scent of ozone, sharp and acrid, mixed with something metallic and vaguely organic, thick in the air. His arm throbbed, a dull ache that he ruthlessly ignored. His gaze fell upon the fallen soldiers. Their bodies seemed... frail, weak, almost skeletal beneath their armor. They were disturbingly

similar to Dr. Raymond, the unsettling image of the emaciated scientist flashing through his mind. A profound sense of dread settled over him.

"You had to do it... you had to do it..." he muttered to himself, the words a desperate, hollow mantra. The memory of his previous court-martial, the cold judgment in the eyes of his superiors, surged through him, pumping a fresh wave of adrenaline into his veins. This wasn't just about survival anymore. This was about proving himself, about redemption. He readied his rifle, the familiar weight of it a grim comfort, and turned, making his way back towards the sublevel seven infirmary. He had to find answers, no matter the cost.-----Back on Earth, a chilling undercurrent began to ripple through society. Whispers of an unfolding Martian crisis, initially dismissed as fringe conspiracy theories, now began to seep into the hidden corners of the world, igniting the fervent imaginations of those who dared to question. In a dimly lit

recording studio, far from the polished newsrooms, the Conspiracy Host sat hunched behind his desk. His face, etched with a mixture of apprehension and grim determination, was illuminated by the single desk lamp. He was a man preparing for a broadcast that, he knew, could shatter the fragile peace of the world, a peace built on carefully constructed lies. He drew a deep, shuddering breath, the weight of his revelations pressing down on him, a burden almost too heavy to bear.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, his voice a low, gravelly rumble, a sound that promised uncomfortable truths. "Our worst fears have been realized. Expect this broadcast to be taken down, and more people to disappear."

Behind him, a graphic of the solar system flickered to life on a large monitor, ominous and foreboding. The familiar planets, once vibrant and life-giving, now seemed to glow with a malevolent, reddish hue. From the

inky blackness of the void, countless red eyes, like distant, hungry embers, glowed ominously, watching.

"We have received reports," he continued, his voice gaining momentum, a growing urgency now evident, "that multiple Sol Union Corp facilities across the entire Sol system have been overrun by an unknown force. The majority of these reports mirror the horrific rumors circulating from the Sol Union Corp Mars facility – the same rumors the corporate media has so vehemently tried to suppress." He paused, allowing his words to sink in, the unspoken implications hanging heavy in the air. "However, it appears these invaders have concentrated their efforts on the Sol Union Corp Mars and Pluto facilities."

The graphic behind him shifted, replaced by a time-lapse video that sent a collective gasp through the unseen audience. It was a horrifying spectacle: a decimated Pluto, its once familiar, icy form now a shattered ruin,

chunks of its shattered surface still drifting lazily into the cosmic void. And through the debris, a creature of nightmare tore through a shimmering red portal. Skeletal, vast, and terrifyingly ethereal, it was a dragon, unlike anything humanity had ever conceived, an ancient horror awakened. Its roars, silent to human ears, echoed through the vast emptiness of space, a harbinger of untold destruction.

"Reports even suggest," the Host pressed on, a grim satisfaction in his tone, "a potential weapon system, dubbed the Horde Annihilation Gun-1210993, has been utilized by the Sol Union Corp to fire upon Pluto itself! Amateur astronomers sent in a series of photographs, which our producers edited into the short video you see on your screen. This sighting, the level 5 evacuation of the Sol Union Corp Mars facility... it feels wrong of me to say I told you so. But be prepared. We will do our best to update you as soon as we

have more information. May God have mercy on our souls."

On Mars, within the bleak confines of Sublevel Seven, William arrived in a scene of utter devastation. The main hall, once a hive of Sol Union Corp activity, was now a charnel house. Decimated bodies of personnel and militia lay scattered, their forms mangled, their blood painting the walls alongside vicious, animalistic claw marks. The stench of death and fear hung heavy in the air.

Suddenly, William's radio crackled to life, a familiar voice whispering through the static. "Can anyone read me? This is Dr. Hall. Corporal Thompson, I see your signal but have not been able to reach you..."

Relief, sharp and sudden, coursed through William. "Dr. Hall? What the hell is going on in this base! I'm looking at a pile of bodies in sublevel seven, and two guys just tried to gun me down!"

A sigh of profound relief echoed over the comms. “Thank God! I was starting to think I was alone. Thompson, the base has been overrun! I managed to escape to a maintenance hatch as those things started to kill everyone!”

William leaned against a shredded wall, trying to catch his breath, his mind struggling to process Taylor’s words. “What things are you talking about?! Seriously, please break it down like you’re talking to a kid! Why did two guys, supposedly on our side, just try to ambush me?! Is the Sol Union Corp working on some kind of zombie bio-weapon?”

“I don’t know how much time we have to chat! Wait... what bioweapon?” Taylor’s voice was tinged with confusion, a stark contrast to William's mounting dread. William's PTSD flared, his body trembling as if sensing the horrific truth of the "weapon."

"There was this red mist that Raymond breathed in before he changed," William stammered, his voice ragged with a mixture of horror and exhaustion. He remembered Raymond's eyes, once so clear and full of life, now clouded with an alien malevolence. "It made him sick, then violent, like a rabid animal, only worse." He glanced at the grotesque, twisted forms of the fallen soldiers he'd just fought, their limbs contorted at impossible angles, their faces frozen in a rictus of feral aggression. "The guys who just attacked me... they looked exactly like Raymond after he turned. They got hit with it too." The metallic tang of fear was sharp on his tongue.

A chilling realization, cold and stark as a winter wind, dawned on Taylor. His breath hitched in his throat. "Son of a bitch... they managed to perfect it..." The words were barely a whisper, yet they resonated with an unspoken dread.

"'Perfect it?' What the hell are you talking about, Corporal?" William demanded, a raw tremor in his voice, his patience fraying under the immense pressure. The plasma burns on his arms, ignored during the frantic fight for survival, now began to sting with an agonizing intensity as the adrenaline, his only shield, began to dissipate.

"Corporal, I don't have much time to explain... I think there are a couple of soldiers, or what used to be soldiers, trying to find me. They're closing in." Taylor's voice was urgent, each word laced with a desperate haste. "This is the truth, William, the absolute, unvarnished truth. These things attacking us, these abominations, are known officially as daemonsters by those who refuse to face the reality... but the truth is they are demons! I'm not talking in a metaphorical sense, William, I mean literal, hell-spawned entities. These things are where the metaphor comes from, where the legends originated!"

William shook his head, disbelief warring with a profound, bone-deep terror. His mind reeled, struggling to reconcile Taylor's words with the grim reality he had just witnessed. "Did you get hit in the head, Hall?! Are you out of your mind?!"

"I wish, trust me, William, I truly wish that were the case." Taylor's voice hardened, stripping away any hint of desperation, leaving only a grim determination. "Believe me or not, I don't care. We don't have time to argue, not now, not with what's coming. That red mist, you're right, it is a biological weapon, but it's something far more insidious than anything we've ever encountered. Think of it like a parasitic fungus, like *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, turning ants into mindless, aggressive zombies, but on a scale that threatens all of humanity. There's no antidote, William, no filtration system, no environmental suit that can keep it out. It's airborne, it's insidious, and it's everywhere."

William slammed his head against the cold, unyielding metal of the wall, a raw, guttural cry of despair escaping his lips. The full, devastating weight of the situation, the horrifying implications of Taylor's words, finally sank in, crushing him under its immense burden. "Well then how the hell are we supposed to fight this?! How can we even hope to survive?!"

A brief, agonizing silence stretched across the radio, punctuated only by the crackle of static. It was a silence that spoke volumes, a chilling testament to the impossible odds they faced.

"Dr. Samael Hendricks was one of the leading scientists behind the expeditions into... other realms," Taylor finally said, his voice softer, almost reverent, as if speaking of a ghost. "He was considered a brilliant, if eccentric, genius. There is technology he developed; cybernetic drone avatars, incredibly advanced weapons systems, even highly so-

phisticated AI. He always feared that explorations into these other realms might risk a potential invasion, a cataclysmic breach... we all thought he was crazy! A paranoid doomsday prophet! Even more so when he allowed that psychotic bitch, Dr. Alicia Neurton, to take over through the classified operations station on Deimos. I swear to God, William, that woman did something to start this, she unleashed this nightmare upon us!"

William, his frustration boiling over, snapped. The searing pain from his plasma burns was a constant, unwelcome reminder of his vulnerability. "Hall! What's the point of this rambling?! Get to it!"

"The point, Corporal," Taylor countered, his voice regaining its sharp edge, "is that crazy son of a bitch, Hendricks, may have something in his personal quarters, something he prepared for this exact scenario, that will help us, that might be our only chance!"

"Alright, how can you be sure?" William asked, a flicker of desperate hope igniting within him, quickly followed by a healthy dose of skepticism.

"The artifacts we recovered from those expeditions... the ancient texts, the strange, otherworldly carvings," Taylor explained, his voice hushed with the gravity of his revelation. "Let's just say that unless we completely got the translations wrong, unless every scholar, every linguist, every cryptographer was mistaken... This is not the first invasion, William. This has happened before, eons ago, perhaps on other worlds, other dimensions. Hendricks was clearly far from stupid enough to ignore the possibility of a recurrence. He anticipated it, he prepared for it."

William's eyes widened, a cold, creeping dread seeping into his very bones, chilling him to the core. The full scope of Taylor's words, the terrifying implication of a cyclical,

cosmic horror, was almost too much to bear. "What's the objective, then? What do we do now?"

"Sergeant Kelso has ordered all remaining Sol Union Corp militia to regroup at emergency bunkers scattered across the base," Taylor replied, his voice firm, professional. "The nearest one to your current position should take you directly past some of the weapons labs. You're going to need more firepower, William, a lot more, if you're going to face what's coming."

"What about you, Taylor? What's your next move?" William asked, a knot of apprehension tightening in his stomach. He didn't want to be left alone in this nightmare.

Another agonizing pause stretched across the radio, longer this time, heavier with unspoken concerns. Then, Taylor's voice, a hushed whisper, almost lost in the static. "I'm going to visit Hendricks's office, his personal

quarters. I need to see if I can find information on a rumored AI program he was developing... something he called 'SUCOR.' If anyone could have prepared for something like this, it's him."

"Do you really think that an AI, a computer program, will help us against... against *them*?" William asked, his voice laced with profound doubt, bordering on disbelief.

"I don't think we have a choice, William," Taylor whispered, his voice fading slightly, as if he were already moving, already embarking on his desperate quest. "We're running out of options. And time." The radio then clicked, signaling the end of their desperate transmission, leaving William utterly alone in the chilling silence of the ravaged base.

William shut his eyes, banging his head against the wall again, before a sudden memory jolted him. The hard drive. Raymond.

"Wait... there was a hard drive Raymond forced into my armor before I..." William panted, heavy breathing filling the silence. "Know anything about that?"

No response. William's worry intensified until his helmet display flickered to life, showing an email message from Taylor Hall.

*TAYLOR HALL (Text): Can't talk, soldiers too close. I will provide more information where I can. I'll get the maps activated in your suit. See if you can patch yourself up. Good luck.*

William slumped his head, an unknown weight pressing down on him. He pushed himself upright, gathered his composure, assessed his wounds, and began the grim walk toward the nearby infirmary.

Meanwhile, Taylor Hall, nestled within a maintenance hall, peered through the hatch overlooking the Sol Union Corp's main hall. Below, two zombie soldiers patrolled.

"If there's anything human still in there... please forgive me... I never knew it would come this far..." he muttered to himself.

He scanned his tablet, miraculously still connected to the Sol Union Corp systems. His mind raced, seeking a remote access point, an escape route. While still monitoring William's signal, he stumbled upon a way to activate his armor's navigation system. He set it off, a desperate prayer.

Still on the tablet, a new option appeared: remote activation of fire alarms in another part of the facility. Thinking the soldiers might respond like predators weeding out weak prey, he triggered the alarm.

The soldiers reacted instantly, grunting and muttering to each other as they sprinted to investigate.

"I was not expecting that to work..." Taylor Hall said, a hint of surprise in his voice.

He seized the opportunity, bolting through the Maintenance Halls, making his way toward Dr. Hendricks's office. A motion nearly mirroring William's journey into the chaos, returning to the infirmary by forcing open the door. The bodies of the nurses were torn apart, the room a gruesome canvas of blood and bits of flesh. He took a moment to observe the scene, mentally hardening his heart, pushing forward. Wounded still, he desperately needed supplies.

He raided a cabinet, finding healing ointments and bandages. Setting his rifle aside on a nearby counter, he tore open the medical supplies. He applied them swiftly, the efficiency of the properties practically wiping away the blood and damaged tissue like wet paint. The sting of the ointments forced William to grit his teeth, breathing through the burning sensation.

Once his wounds were covered, William started to search the infirmary for a snack fridge, hoping to gather food. He found one hidden in the back, near some computers, and began stashing packs of crackers and bottles of water into his I.F. Storage Packs. Whether for himself or for any survivors he might come across, whatever was to happen next, he needed provisions. To prepare for the possibility of finding survivors, William grabbed what else he could to stash in his armor.

He stopped when a guttural clicking broke the silence from behind him. Similar to a large lizard, the clicking was paired with hisses and growls. The sounds grew louder as the creature revealed itself from the ceiling, an Insecto. Its skin was brown, leathery, and moist; multiple eyes, claws protruding from its fingers, spikes sticking out from its skin, and multiple red eyes... this was William's first look at a daemonster.

"What... the fuck..." William breathed, shocked.

The Insecto lunged, gripping him by the shoulders. His weapons out of reach, he was forced to use his surroundings to fight. The creature's agility, similar to that of a big cat, allowed it to constantly be on the move, as if toying with him. William, trying to assess how to fight back, reached for his rifle, but the creature launched a fireball. Adrenaline pumping through his veins, William managed to launch himself at the Insecto, wounding it with shards of glass from broken cabinets. A struggle ensued, the Insecto attempting to claw at William as it was being forced into the cabinet.

William scanned his immediate surroundings for something to kill the Insecto. His gaze landed on a surgical saw on a nearby table. He quickly jumped for it. The Insecto, eager to kill its assailant, jumped away.

William positioned himself to charge, surgical saw in hand. The two launched at one another. William killed the Insecto by shoving the surgical saw through the side of its head, killing it instantly.

The Insecto's body dropped as William caught his breath. "What in the fuck are you?!"

Radio static interfered with William's thoughts. It was a silent transmission from Sergeant Kelso.

"This is Sergeant Kelso, transmitting from Sol Union Corp Bunker D00ME2, requesting response from any Sol Union Corp militia personnel who can hear me."

William adjusted himself and his armor, opening his radio communications.

"Sergeant. This is Corporal Thompson. I'm currently in the sublevel 7 infirmary."

There was a pause over the radio.

"Corporal? It's good to hear from you. Were you able to locate Dr. Raymond?"

"Yessir. But, he was lost when the invaders hit. He inhaled some red mist that turned him feral, I had no other choice but to terminate."

"That's unfortunate, soldier, but understood. I've received multiple reports of a similar mist across the base... all turning good folk into these... things."

William remembered Taylor Hall's explanation.

"Sergeant, Dr. Hall believes the mist is the result of a bioweapon... one that releases some kind of mind-control parasite."

"Parasite? What about the mutations?"

"Mutations?"

"The invaders, son, that look like goddamn daemonsters... the mist seems to be able to cause rapid mutation in who it infects..."

William looked at the corpse of the Insecto, realizing that the thing he had just killed was the man he had subdued earlier.

"What's the mission objective?"

"Link up with any militia you come across, gather any survivors, and haul your ass down here! From your position you should be able to get to the weapons labs, while on your way, and find some better gear. Do you know Dr. Hall's whereabouts?"

"Sir, last I heard from him, he was using maintenance ways to get to Dr. Hendricks's quarters."

"What the hell does he think he's doing?"

"He believed Hendricks might have something that could turn the tide of the invasion..."

There was a light muttering over the radio transmission from Sergeant Kelso, grumbling under his breath.

"Then I guess we have no choice but to let him. Get to work, Corporal, and good job making it this far. I'll attempt to establish with other units. I believe your boarding buddy Frandsen won't be far from you. Stay alert, marine, stay alive. Kelso out."

William gathered his weapons, his attention caught by the sudden appearance of a map in his helmet's HUD.

"I'm probably being an idiot," William sighed, "but about damn time..."

With his rifle clutched tight and his pistol secured to his armor, William burst from the infirmary, driven by a singular, desperate objective. The journey ahead was his alone, a mirror reflecting the sheer desperation that propelled him forward.-----Taylor Hall sought refuge in a quiet corner of the maintenance hall, a brief respite to reclaim his breath and strategize. His tablet materialized, its screen illuminating as he began to scrutinize William's movements. A sharp text alert sliced through the silence, announcing a message from Dr. Samael Hendricks.

“What the hell do you want now?” Taylor muttered, his thumb hovering over the message. He opened it, revealing an attached video file—security footage, it seemed. A closer inspection revealed its origin: the highly restricted Deimos Classified Operations.

*It appears that my successor to the field expeditions is to blame for this predicament.*

Taylor's fingers flew across the screen, his response biting and swift.

*We all tried to warn you about Neurton, Dr. Hendricks... now countless are dead or dying.*

He sent the message, then tapped the video. No sound accompanied the chilling visuals. The footage began with the precise moment Alicia Neurton's blade had met a scientist's throat, her subsequent consumption of his blood unveiling the gruesome events that followed as the remaining scientists scrambled to another section of the facility. Taylor Hall's face filled the screen, a canvas of shock, disgust, and unadulterated horror. His visible distress was abruptly interrupted by another message from Dr. Hendricks.

*I accept full responsibility for the events that transpire before us. When I first received an alert that Alicia had lowered the magnetic barriers of*

*the teleportation chambers, I knew it was already too late. Observe what you can of the video, it was the best I was able to recover. I am meeting with the United Nation and Galactic Councils to discuss further contingencies if we cannot contain the invasion. Other facilities have managed to shut down the entryways... as for Pluto... that still needs assessed.*

Taylor continued to watch, the video now depicting the cult-like scientists, preparing in another part of the facility, readying themselves to enter a portal alongside Alicia Neurton. The screen flickered to static, then cleared as the group vanished through the shimmering gateway. Moments later, Alicia Neurton burst back through the portal—scared, scarred, and drenched in blood. Panic etched every line of her face as she ran for her life. She lunged for a computer terminal, desperate to activate security protocols. The still-wet blood on her allowed her to scrawl an indecipherable message on a nearby wall, obscured from the camera's view.

A figure materialized behind her, clad in a solemn tunic and adorned with metallic religious accoutrements. It wielded a staff topped with a crescent moon-shaped blade. Human in appearance, yet with ghastly white skin and prominent red eyes, it was a Hell Priest, Dagan.

Alicia turned to face the entity, attempting to project defiance, but she was too terrified to compose herself. She appeared to be bargaining, perhaps for her very existence. The Hell Priest approached her, its grotesque grin the only response to her pleas. Dagan raised his staff, the blade arcing in one fluid motion. Alicia Neurton's body slumped to the floor, her head severed. The impact of her fall sent the first tremor through the base, signaling the invasion's grim commencement.

"Jesus..." Taylor gasped, the word escaping him in a ragged whisper.

The video concluded with Dagan effortlessly lifting Alicia Neurton's severed head with a single hand before stepping back through the portal. A guttural, daemonic growl wrenched Taylor Hall's attention away from the screen. He snapped his tablet shut and moved quietly through the maintenance shafts, every nerve alive with dread.

The dread of the catastrophe unfolding around them continually builds for both men. William Thompson exited an elevator, taking him to Sublevel 6. Nearby signs indicated a maternity ward, next to staff living quarters and various other facilities, with weapons labs further down the corridor. William's map charted a course to the weapons lab. However, his attention was drawn towards a video monitor in the maternity ward, and a familiar lab coat and nametag belonging to Marianne Fagin, tossed aside. Blood covered the walls, with bodies of staff and patients thrown about. William

entered the maternity ward, fearing what he may find.

# Chapter 6

# Thy Flesh...

William swept through the maternity ward, his eyes scanning for any signs of life. The silence was absolute, save for the crunch of his boots on scattered debris. He prodded a few lifeless bodies with his foot, confirming their stillness before moving on. His gaze landed on a computer terminal, its screen flickering with what appeared to be a medical staff training video. Taking a deep breath, William pressed play.

The video came to life. A nurse, her demeanor professional and kind, guided Marianne Fagin to an examination table. In a chair

by the wall, an armored Thomas Frandsen bounced his leg with barely contained excitement, a tear tracing a path down his cheek.

The screen flickered to life, showing a serene scene that momentarily stole William's breath: Marianne, her hair artfully disheveled, sitting up in bed, a soft glow illuminating her features. Opposite her, on a smaller screen, sat the Maternity Nurse, her uniform crisp and her smile comforting. "Alright, Ms. Fagin, how are we feeling today?" the nurse's voice, warm and reassuring, cut through the digital space.

Marianne's reply was a little shaky, a nervous tremor betraying her calm demeanor. "Good, good. I've had some sporadic nausea but nothing too dramatic." A small, self-deprecating smile touched her lips.

The nurse chuckled, a sound that seemed to carry genuine amusement. "Lucky girl," she smirked. "Your tests all came back clean. No signs of any issues for you or the little

one." Her gaze shifted slightly, as if acknowledging someone off-screen.

Thomas, still in his worn armchair, was openly weeping with joy, his shoulders shaking with the force of his emotions. He clumsily wiped at his eyes, a choked sob escaping him. The nurse's voice, now playful, drew his attention. "So, is the shaking soldier boy here the father?" she quipped, a playful glint dancing in her eyes.

Marianne's eyes, soft with affection, met Thomas's. A shared smile, tender and overflowing with a lifetime of unspoken promises, blossomed between them. "Yes, yes he is," she confirmed, her voice thick with emotion, each word a testament to their love.

"Good choice," the nurse winked, a knowing conspiratorial look crossing her face. She turned, retrieving a futuristic computer monitor, its sleek design hinting at advanced tech-

nology, for the upcoming ultrasound. She set it up beside Marianne, the screen humming softly to life. Her gaze settled on Thomas, a warm invitation in her eyes. "So, dad-to-be, you want to come over here? It's about time for the baby's first pictures."

Thomas rose, a man utterly overwhelmed. Words failed him, trapped somewhere between his bursting heart and trembling lips. He stumbled forward, gripping Marianne's hand, his fingers intertwining with hers as if to anchor himself. He leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to her temple, a silent prayer of gratitude. Marianne's eyes welled up, shimmering with unshed tears, as the nurse, with practiced gentleness, lifted her shirt, exposing her stomach, a canvas of burgeoning life. The ultrasound machine hummed to life, a low, comforting thrum. The nurse applied the transducer to Marianne's abdomen, a cool gel slowly releasing from the device, spreading across her skin. In moments, the screen revealed a detailed image of the fetus, surpris-

ingly large, a tiny human form taking shape before their eyes. The nurse adjusted the transducer, centering it over the tiny figure, and then, a sound that transcended time and space, the strong, rhythmic thud of a heartbeat, echoed through the room.

William felt a fresh wave of tears, hot and stinging, transported back to the first time he'd heard Flynn's heartbeat during an ultrasound, a memory both precious and achingly painful.

"The baby is a bit on the big side," the Maternity Nurse announced, her voice a calm counterpoint to the thrumming heartbeat, "but the heart is strong as ever."

Thomas enveloped Marianne in a tight embrace, their bodies pressing together, a desperate, joyous communion. Their lips met in a fervent kiss, a pure outpouring of exhilaration, a silent symphony of their boundless love and hope.

"So, everything is good?" Thomas asked, his voice cracking with relief, a raw vulnerability in his tone. "Nothing...nothing wrong?" His gaze, filled with a mixture of hope and fear, sought reassurance.

The nurse smiled reassuringly, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Don't worry. We've been closely monitoring everything. Through samples we've collected so far from Ms. Fagin... we can say with confidence that you two are expecting a happy, healthy... baby girl."

Marianne and Thomas stared at the nurse, stunned, their minds struggling to process the impossible, wonderful news.

"It's... a girl?!" Marianne whispered, her voice barely audible, tears streaming down her face, a cascade of pure, unadulterated joy.

The nurse nodded, a warm, knowing smile on her lips, sharing in their profound happiness. Marianne and Thomas, as if pulled by an invisible force, pulled each other into a full embrace, their joy palpable, radiating outwards, filling the room with an almost incandescent glow. Thomas rested his head on Marianne's forehead, taking a deep, shuddering breath, composing himself. William's eyes narrowed, a cold dread washing over him as he noticed Thomas fumbling in his pocket. A small engagement ring box, its velvet exterior glinting in the light, emerged. Thomas palmed it, muttering something to Marianne, too softly for the video to capture. To William, the scene was agonizingly familiar, a cruel echo of his own past.

Thomas was about to propose.

Before he could pop the question, the first tremor hit. Confusion rippled through everyone in the video.

"What the hell is going on?" Thomas yelled, his voice strained.

Marianne was hyperventilating, terror etched on her face. The nurses tried to calm her as Thomas frantically assessed their surroundings. The second tremor struck, rattling the room violently. Then the third. An evacuation announcement blared through the video. Thomas grabbed Marianne's hand, and they bolted off-camera. The video cut out abruptly, leaving only the sound of the maternity staff screaming in terror.

"I should've taken you up on that offer, Thomas..." William murmured to himself, the words heavy with regret.

He took a moment to compose himself, his attention snagged by a distant, rhythmic pattern of metallic bangs. The sound was too structured, too consistent to be random debris clanking in the chaos. William adjusted his grip on his weapon, aiming it as he po-

sitioned himself at the entrance to the maternity ward. The metallic bangs continued, drawing closer. He focused his senses, trying to pinpoint the source.

"This is Corporal William Thompson with Sol Union Corp militia," he said, his voice cutting through the radio static. "Can anyone read me?"

The metal bangs grew louder, closer.

"If you can read me," William continued, his voice echoing with a strained urgency, "and are unable to reach a comm, sound off twice."

Two distinct metallic bangs, resonant with a desperate hope, echoed through the cavernous hall. Survivors? William felt a surge of resolve, a quiet strength settling over him. He was in charge now.

He moved quickly through the grotesque landscape of scattered bodies, his boots crunching on debris, the metallic bangs growing louder, clearer, pulling him forward. “Keep sounding off,” he broadcast over the radio, his voice a steady anchor in the chaos. “I’m almost to your position.”

The source of the sound was a supply closet, its entrance a chaotic barricade of heavy metallic debris. A voice, weak but impossibly familiar, called from within. “Corporal! In here!”

Adrenaline surged through William, lending him an almost superhuman strength. He tore at the twisted metal, grunting with effort, until the last chuck flew aside. With a final heave, he yanked the door open. Initially, the closet appeared empty, then Thomas’s voice, a ghost of its former self, spoke again. “Over here, behind the shelves...”

Thomas dropped the metal bar that had been his signal, the sound echoing hollowly as William rushed in.

The supply closet, hidden deep within the sublevel SIX main corridor of Sol Union Corp, was a scene of grim intimacy. William found Thomas slumped against the wall, a wounded woman cradled in his arms. It was Marianne. Thomas's battle armor, heavy and dented, lay beside them as if carefully placed.

"Jesus, Frandsen... how the hell did you manage to get this far?" William knelt, his voice thick with disbelief and concern.

Thomas chuckled, a dry, raspy sound. "I was trying to protect my lucky lady, brother..." A cough racked his body.

"Save your energy. I've got some supplies." William focused, producing the nutrient-rich juices he'd salvaged from the infirmary. He

uncapped one for Thomas, helping him drink while Thomas still held Marianne close.

"Hun, I don't... it hurts," Marianne whispered, her voice weak.

William set aside the bottle, his gaze fixed on Marianne's injuries. He helped Thomas gently roll her forward, the better to examine her. Blood covered everything, mostly cuts and scrapes, but then William noticed the extra tissue between her legs. A sickening realization dawned.

"We'll be okay baby... we'll be okay," Thomas murmured, tears building in his eyes as he attempted to comfort her. Everyone knew the truth, a silent agony that hung heavy in the air—Marianne had lost the baby in the madness.

"Let's see if we can get you bandaged up, Marianne..." William's voice was strained, a deep breath barely containing his own grief.

Marianne looked to Thomas, her face etched with a quiet acceptance of her fate. "I'm okay... save it for someone else..."

William respected her wishes. His head dropped, his heart breaking in his chest.

"Did I hear you watching the maternity video, William?" Thomas's voice was surprisingly calm, almost conversational.

William nodded.

"I thought so. I wanted to thank you for watching it..."

"Why?"

"Of all the places for it to end... I wouldn't want to be forgotten in a damn storage closet on a desert planet!" Thomas laughed, a sound devoid of true humor. William, recognizing the darkness creeping into Thomas's mind,

struggled to hold his composure. Thomas did not expect to leave alive.

"But it seemed like the closest thing to keep from getting eaten by those fucking pink things that charged us..."

William searched for a way to change the conversation, to offer a sliver of light in the encroaching gloom. "The baby... did you two think of a name?"

Marianne's face softened, a gentle smile gracing her lips. She managed to sit up, burying her face into Thomas's neck in one last loving embrace.

"If it was gonna be a boy, we were thinking 'Michael Thomas Roy'," Thomas began, tears welling in his eyes. "And, for a girl... 'Alicia Lillian Ireena,' or 'Emilia Harper'." He was unable to hold back his tears.

Marianne lifted her head, wiping his eyes with a tender hand before kissing him on the cheek. "Don't forget their last name... Frandsen."

Thomas was surprised, his emotions intensifying. "What?"

Marianne stared into his eyes, tears brimming in her own. "I want our family to have your last name. I want to marry you..."

Thomas gripped Marianne tight, too emotional to speak. William, even in his own despair, found himself crying.

Then, Marianne's body began to fall limp in Thomas's arms. William froze.

"Mary? Mary?" Thomas's voice was a frantic whisper. He loosened his grip, his gaze fixed on Marianne's face, and the realization hit him: she had just died in his arms. He clutched her body tighter, his breath coming

in ragged gasps. William remained frozen at the sight, the agony of Thomas's loss, of losing everything, mirroring his own.

"Thomas..." William's voice was a tearful plea.

"Corporal... I think you need to go..."

William took a deep breath, steeling himself. "You coming with me to end this, soldier?"

Thomas glared at William, then reached for his armor. His hand settled on it, triggering a mechanism that released everything it was carrying.

"Do you believe the old stories of beings from other worlds choosing to reincarnate as us, William?" Thomas asked, his voice weak.

William took a moment to process Thomas's actions, observing the load his ar-

mor had just released – mostly weapons and grenades. "I'm not sure what to believe anymore..."

Thomas reached into his pocket, pulling out a blood-soaked picture of him and Marianne. "I don't blame you... I'd be the same..." He handed the photograph to William, but still held a tight grip.

"What is it?" William asked.

"Can I ask a favor, from one man who went through shit to another that's drowning in it?" Thomas's voice cracked with tears and struggled to breathe through the heartache. "Don't let us be remembered like this, not as just more bodies for these monsters to snack on... Take whatever you think you might need from my load, you're gonna need everything you can get your hands on... Just leave me one grenade..."

William looked at Thomas, trying to suppress the horror in his eyes.

"Please man, just one grenade. The shit they keep in these supply closets will do the rest... I can't let my girls be alone like this. And, I think, some of those fucking things that killed everyone can teleport on their own... I have to protect what little of them I can."

William nodded. "You have my word, brother..."

"And just in case I somehow come back, you and me are gonna rip whatever bastard who brought these things out a new one." William took the photo from Thomas, making a fist with the same hand and pounding it with Thomas's.

"I wish I could've gotten to know you better brother, taken you up on that drink..." William began gathering what supplies he

could from Thomas, carefully leaving the single grenade he'd asked for.

"Then at least the memory of me lives vicariously through you," Thomas smirked through his tears. "The weapons labs here have some shiny toys I've only ever gotten glimpses, but you're gonna need something stronger than the plasma pea shooters they give us when we start. I was out there, trying to get some supplies for Marianne... I swore a bunch of those things set up a buffet further down the corridor..."

William placed a hand on Thomas's shoulder. "Thank you. Marianne was a smart girl to choose you."

Thomas smiled, gripping Marianne's body tighter as William left the closet to make his way to the weapons lab. When the coast was clear, Thomas shuffled himself, digging out the engagement ring from his pocket and sliding it onto Marianne's left hand.

He sighed in despair. "You deserved so much better than me, better than this. But because of you I was a better man. All I wanted was to return the favor, to have your back as you had mine. You were the woman of my dreams, the fire to my heart, my best friend. I love you. I loved everything about you, even when you thought you looked horrible there was no one else I wanted more. Even like this, especially now..."

The sounds of daemonsteric hisses and growls approaching caught Thomas's attention. He slowly moved Marianne's body so it would sit next to him, her limp limbs seemingly trying to hold on to her fiancé. Thomas readied the grenade as the daemonsters came closer. He stared at Marianne, then kissed her forehead. "I guess it's time to go home hun, wait for me."

A disembodied voice whispered in the air, its source unknown. It sounded like a young

girl. "Daddy, the fight's not over. Mommy is waiting for you..."

In the main corridor of Sublevel Six, not far from the supply closet, William Thompson made his way towards the weapons lab, the picture of Thomas and Marianne still clutched in his hand. He glanced back towards the supply closet, just as echoing daemonsteric growls were abruptly suppressed by a grenade explosion. Thomas and Marianne were officially gone.

"A great man, and a patient woman, that's how I'll remember you. Everything I wished I could be." William sighed, tucking the photo into a pocket in his pants, and continued his solitary journey to the Weapons Lab.

# Chapter 7

# Consumed

Taylor Hall emerged from a maintenance hall, stepping into the hushed opulence of the Sol Union Corp's executive suite. The offices of the facility's highest-ranking members lined the pristine corridors, utterly untouched by the chaos he'd just navigated. A pang of bewildered frustration hit him; how could this sanctuary remain so pristine amidst the invasion? Shaking his head, he refocused on his objective, his strides purposeful as he moved towards Samael Hendricks's office.

He reached the door, his hand already extended for the handle, only to find it stubbornly locked. "God dammit, Hendricks!" Taylor muttered, a growl rumbling in his chest. Sol Union Corp procedures dictated that all doors remain unlocked in a Level 5 emergency. "Now I know you've got something hiding in here." He pulled out his tablet, its screen glowing in the dim light. A quick connection to the mainframe, and then he activated a decryption program, a silent battle against the locks Hendricks had so meticulously placed on his office.

For William, his battle was only ramping up as he entered the weapons lab, admiring the sophisticated technology that seemed it would shine an almost heavenly glow if it were not soaked in blood. He swept the room, finding various gadgets and experimental weapons locked in glass cases. His attention was drawn to two open cases with display panels showing information about what was inside. One case held a weapon labeled "B.F.G

9000," the other displayed information for a "Plasma Bladed Chainsaw." William moved deeper into the weapons labs to find even more exotic weapons. He found himself impressed, taking a moment to observe his options.

"What the hell kind of fight were you dumb bastards prepping for?" William mumbled, dumbfounded.

William raided the armory. He stashed as many grenades as he could grasp, of various varieties, into his armor before moving onto larger weapons. He found a Heavy Plasma Rifle.

Hellish squeals and grunts echoed in the room. William was confronted by a new daemonster—pink skin, large mouth, primate-like muscles, possible armored flesh, a horn, and a shrimp-like tail. In its monstrous maw, the Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster held a partially eaten soldier. The dead soldier was

holding a sleek, futuristic chainsaw. William realized this was one of the creatures that Thomas had confronted.

"Aren't you ugly?" William said, a grimace on his face.

The Pink Gorilla Shark Beast dropped the dead soldier and started to charge towards William. William managed to duck behind a pillar as the beast rammed itself into a series of computer panels. William grabbed his standard plasma rifle and opened fire, making his way towards the dropped chainsaw. Each shot barely showed any effect on the Pink Gorilla Shark Beast. The beast got ready for another charge towards William. William jumped towards the chainsaw, barely able to activate it and slice the beast right through its mouth—cutting the entire creature in half. William caught his breath, realizing what he had just done. He admired the blade, resembling a flowing plasma stream in the place of regular chainsaw teeth. William started to

laugh in excitement, adrenaline clearly filling his system.

"You're coming with me!" William said to the chainsaw.

William scoured through remaining weapon cases to determine what else he might need for future encounters. Not knowing what to anticipate, William opened the cases for a plasma-based "Vortex Rifle," "Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle," and a "Rocket Launcher with Plasmoid Modification." Each case holding the weapons showed detailed information about how to operate the exact functions. William, knowing it may not be long before more daemonsters came, opted to just figure it out. William was armed for war. His determination only faltered by the sound of his radio system turning on.

"Thompson? Thompson? You still alive?" Taylor Hall's voice crackled over the radio.

William took cover to answer Hall's transmission. "I'm debating that, what's your status?"

"I made it to Hendricks's office... the old bastard has his own encryption on his office I'm trying to bypass," Taylor replied. "But that's not the weird part... the executive suite... it's as if daemonsters completely avoided it..."

William's eyes widened. "What?!" He stuck his head out from cover to check for any sign of hostiles. "What the hell are they hiding in there?"

"Trust me, I want to know. You'd think everyone was just out to lunch... You still got that hard drive Raymond shoved into you?" Taylor asked.

"Yeah, as far as I know it's still linked. You gonna tell me what it is?" William asked.

"I thought I saw the software update start uploading earlier. Raymond's hard drive had the AI..." Taylor started.

"So why doesn't it work?" William interrupted.

"It needs remote activation, last I heard it was highly experimental, possibly volatile. If anyone tried to activate it outside of the executive suite, it would fry the device used." Taylor explained, a hint of unease in his voice.

William became worried. "Hall... you saying this damn thing could incinerate me?"

"Mostly your armor, you might get a few second-degree burns—smell like barbeque, no pressure!" Taylor said, a nervous chuckle in his voice.

"DOC!" William chuckled and yelled.

Taylor Hall could be heard chuckling nervously. "Easy Thompson, I'm just trying to survive like you are! Where are you at now?"

"Sub 6, Weapons Lab... it seems to be the general consensus that I needed more guns," William replied.

"At least you have that. I'm practically naked out here." A series of electronic beeps could be heard over the radio from Hall's tablet. "I'm in. Probably best you keep moving towards Sergeant Kelso. Hall, out."

"Stay alive, Hall," William said, his voice a distorted echo before the radio crackled into silence. He pushed himself up from the cold floor of the weapons lab, the metallic tang of the air still heavy around him, and strode out.

Back on Earth, a worn-down home served as the backdrop for the conspiracy host's frantic final broadcast. He stood before it, framed by the cracked concrete of a city

street under a harsh daytime sun. Luggage bags, bursting with supplies, and stacks of boxes were haphazardly piled around him. His phone, propped up against a leaning post, cast a flickering glow on his face as he streamed from a mobile app. Breathless and wide-eyed with a desperate urgency, he wrestled a heavy box into the back of a battered van, but his focus remained fixed on the live comments scrolling furiously across the screen.

A flash of movement: his border collie, a bundle of quivering fur, darted into the van, as if sensing the impending chaos. The host swallowed, his voice cracking with a raw intensity.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the situation is about to get worse. I wish I was the crackpot some of you accuse me of being..." He paused, pushing another bag into the van, his words tumbling out in a rush. "Kill switches

set by my sources have been activated – a move only to be done if they were killed."

He returned to the camera, his eyes blazing. "What I am about to say is not planned, recorded, scripted in any way. You see me loading up these bags, you all need to do that now! Gather food, water, clothes, as many loved ones as you can and get to shelter now!"

The comments continued to scroll, a chaotic mix of fear and derision.

"The most recent update I received about the situation on Mars is that out of an estimated two million stationed on the planet, there are only five possible survivors! This was maybe an hour ago. There are multiple reports, that you all can verify, of anything Sol Union Corp related being surrounded by military forces across the globe. There are also reports of galactic allies moving into var-

ious positions across the system, standard widespread evacuation plans."

He moved away again, throwing more bags into the van, his shoulders hunched with the weight of the unfolding disaster.

"In the documents released, there were mentions of tremors and some kind of red mist before the attacks began. The reports seem rushed, many incomplete. I don't know what use this information will be but..." He took a deep, shuddering breath, "...maybe it'll save somebody."

Hours later, William found himself before one of Sol Union Corp's emergency bunkers, its formidable entrance scarred by a violent breach. He stepped inside, the air thick with the acrid scent of ozone and something metallic, something like blood. The corridor was a charnel house, littered with the butchered remains of Sol Union personnel

and militia, a macabre tableau that stole his breath.

A high-pitched electrical whine vibrated through the air, followed by the deafening crack of a discharge. The air rippled with the dying shrieks of unseen horrors. William charged forward, his weapon a cold comfort in his grip. He burst into the bunker proper, his eyes widening at the scene before him.

Sergeant Kelso, impossibly, was still alive, though just barely. He was a wreck, pinned against a wall, but around him lay a grim testament to his final stand: a bloody mosaic of imp, zombie, and even Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster corpses. The Horde Annihilation Gun, a massive, futuristic weapon, clattered to the ground beside him.

William rushed to Kelso's side. "Sarge!" he choked out, his voice hoarse.

Kelso's breath hitched, a ragged sound. "About damn time you got here, Thompson...did Frandsen make it?"

William shook his head, the memory of Frandsen's final act a fresh wound. "He took himself off the board. The baby didn't make it."

A grim understanding flickered in Kelso's eyes. "Poor bastard. Can't say I blame him." He coughed, a wet, rattling sound, then glanced at the Horde Annihilation Gun. "You looking for a 'Welcome to Mars' present, marine?"

"No, sir," William said, his gaze still fixed on the carnage. "I'm still just processing everything."

Kelso's voice was weak, but a hint of a familiar gruffness remained. "You've done well for a rookie. No wonder the Sol Union Corp

brass wanted you on the move upon touchdown."

William stiffened. "Sir, what do you mean they wanted me on the move?"

"I told you, I read your file before you arrived on base," Kelso rasped, his voice fading. "Someone up high must want you in bed enough to get you in the field ASAP. Or they knew this fucking Hell was coming and wanted you dead. I can't rule either out."

William reached for his I.F. Packs. "Need a drink, sir? I raided some fridges in the infirmary."

Kelso grunted, a sound of pain and resignation. "No, soldier, no. There's no point." His gaze, heavy with a terrible resolve, drifted back to the Annihilation Gun. "That gun there, is the strongest thing the Sol Union Corp developed for infantry units. I'm not sure how effective all the bells and whistles

are the lab rats slapped on it. But..." He coughed, a geyser of blood erupting from his lips. "If you're gonna survive this...you'll need it."

A familiar dread settled in William's gut. This was it. Like with Frandsen, Kelso was working up to his dying wish.

"If you want this gun, then your objective is clear," Kelso continued, his voice surprisingly firm. "When you leave here, you are to rip whoever started this shitstorm to shreds by any means necessary."

"And before that?" William asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Kelso's eyes, though clouded with pain, held a chilling clarity. "I need you to kill me."

William's eyes widened, the words striking him like a physical blow.

"Don't give me that look, Thompson," Kelso rasped, a faint, almost sardonic smile touching his lips. "The mist...it got to me. I've been able to fight it off as long as I could. But looking like a mutt's chew toy, I'm out of the fight...and the last thing those fuckers need is access to that tech. I got a look at some of those bastards raiding the base. They're using gear with Sol Union Corp branding, gear that is not on any direct file. Someone here has been supplying them weapons. It may be too late, but I can't take that chance. Charge up a shot with your pistol...blow my brains out...and the gun is yours."

The weight of the decision pressed heavily on William, shaping the journey through the lens of Taylor Hall's relentless pursuit as he finally slipped into Dr. Hendricks's office, a lingering bewilderment settling over him at the unexpected lack of alarm. The office walls were adorned with ancient stone tablets, their surfaces etched with the brutal artistry of medieval warriors locked in battle

against grotesque, hellish creatures. The engravings seemed to outline a map to some hidden burial site, though large sections were frustratingly absent. Stone statues of the very warriors depicted on the tablets stood opposite Hendricks's desk, their silent gazes fixed on some distant, unseen foe.

As Taylor Hall moved towards the desk, a familiar photograph caught his eye. An early group shot of the pioneers, the architects of the transdimensional expeditions. A display on the frame scrolled through their names: Dr. Taylor Hall, Dr. Gabriel Raymond, Dr. Miguel Carson, Dr. Kevin Gerard, Dr. Alicia Neurton, Dr. Melvin Bertonia, Dr. Samantha Peterson, Dr. Darren Cloud, and Dr. Samael Hendricks. Raymond, Hall, Carmack, Peterson, and Cloud beamed with youthful exuberance. Guerard, Neurton, and Melvin Bertonia, however, appeared more somber, their expressions serious. Hendricks, though, was focused elsewhere, his gaze directed to

his left, as if sensing a familiar, malevolent presence.

"If only we knew..." Taylor Hall murmured to himself, his voice a low whisper. He scrutinized the Martian landscape in the photo's backdrop and, in the direction of Hendricks's over-the-shoulder glance, a hazy figure materialized. It resembled the Hell Priest who had taken Alicia Neurton's life—Dagan—his finger extended, pointing at Neurton.

Taylor's thoughts were abruptly shattered by a voice transmission from Hendricks's computer—Hendricks himself.

"I must admit I am surprised you managed to make it this far, Dr. Hall."

Taylor sank into the chair at Hendricks's desk. "Only because I knew you had some kind of contingency."

"It delights me to hear you remember," Samael Hendricks's voice crackled through the speaker, a hint of his old, dry wit, yet underscored by a palpable urgency. "But it is without saying that we are running out of time to contain this. I've done my best to decipher the Argentan tablets since your departure from the program, pouring over every glyph and fragmented prophecy. However, the whereabouts of the mythical Slayer remain desperately unclear. My ability to monitor the situation from my current station has been severely hindered, almost as if an unseen force is actively working to obscure my efforts. Tell me, old friend, where is SUCOR?"

Taylor's brow furrowed in confusion at first, the name triggering a faint, almost forgotten echo in his mind. Then, a flash of memory, sharp and sudden: the sleek, black hard drive Raymond had, with meticulous care, inserted into William's armor. It was a detail so mundane at the time, yet now it felt imbued with profound significance.

"I believe Raymond inserted it into a soldier's armor before he was killed... one of the newer models, if I recall correctly," Taylor replied, the pieces of the puzzle slowly clicking into place.

Hendricks chuckled, a sound that held a surprising note of satisfaction amidst the gravity of their situation. "Good. It was my hope that Raymond would do just that. He always did have a knack for anticipating my more clandestine directives, even when they went against protocol."

"Would SUCOR be able to stop this, or am I wasting my time being here, risking everything for a ghost?" Taylor pressed, his voice laced with a desperate urgency, the weight of their precarious situation pressing down on him. The memory of the chaos, the screams, the relentless pursuit, fueled his impatience.

"In the hands of someone like Corporal Thompson, it will be more than enough," Hendricks replied, a clear note of triumph in his tone, a rare crack in his usual composed demeanor. "Thompson's unique neural pathways and inherent adaptability make him the ideal conduit for SUCOR's full capabilities. Now, I'm remotely initiating SUCOR's activation sequence on my device."

A window prompt opened on Hendricks's computer, seemingly of its own accord, the green text against a black background stark and unyielding. It was the familiar interface of his bespoke operating system, a digital fortress he had built with his own hands.

"I'll need you to input the exact sequences I tell you to allow full functionality. This isn't a simple plug-and-play operation; it requires a precise, almost symbiotic interaction to unleash SUCOR's true potential. I may have a plan to stop this, a final gambit that could turn the tide. But it will require the

four of us to work together, just like the old days."

Hall's confusion deepened, a knot forming in his stomach. Four? Who was he referring to? The last time they had operated as a quartet, it had been a lifetime ago, a different war, a different enemy.

"I know it has been some time since we last worked together, Hall. Believe me, I miss the old days, the synergy, the shared purpose," Hendricks continued, a wistful quality to his voice, a hint of nostalgia softening his usually pragmatic delivery. "SUCOR has become something so much more than an advanced AI, beyond even my own aspirations. It has evolved, adapted, learned in ways I never fully anticipated. Now... follow these exact instructions, precisely as I give them to you. Every keystroke, every command, is critical. When this is completed, when SUCOR is fully integrated, I'll direct you to a nearby

armory to arm yourself. You're going to need every ounce of firepower you can get."

# Chapter 8

# No Rest for the Living

William's boots crunched on the scorched earth, each step a grim punctuation mark to the life he had just extinguished. Sergeant Kelso lay sprawled, a grotesque tableau of what remained after a plasma bolt had carved a clean, cauterized exit through his skull. It wasn't an act of malice, William rationalized, but an execution – a mercy born of grim necessity. The Horde Annihilation Gun, a weapon of brutal efficiency, was already secured in its specialized housing within his armor, its absence from

his hands a silent testament to the deed. A heavy shroud of regret threatened to engulf him, a suffocating weight that pressed down with the silence of the battlefield.

Suddenly, a crisp chime resonated within his helmet, a sound that sliced through the oppressive quiet. It was SUCOR, the Sol Union Corp's artificial intelligence. Its voice, a paradox of robotic precision and an almost unsettling human warmth, broke the spell of his internal turmoil.

"His fears were not misplaced," SUCOR's voice echoed, calm and even-toned. "The transformation was mere moments from consuming him. You only did what was right."

William flinched, his head snapping up, his gaze sweeping the ruined landscape as if searching for the disembodied voice. "Who is speaking to me?" he demanded, his own voice hoarse, strained.

"Hello, Corporal Thompson," SUCOR replied, its voice devoid of inflection, yet somehow conveying a sense of recognition. "I am SUCOR, a sentient intelligence assigned to Mars. My systems were remotely activated by Dr. Hall, under Dr. Hendricks' instruction."

William grunted, a sound of disbelief and grudging acceptance. He took a long moment to process the bizarre reality that he was conversing with an artificial intelligence, a disembodied voice in his head offering commentary on his actions.

"I understand you may not be in the best mental state," SUCOR continued, its tone remarkably free of judgment, almost empathetic. "But I have analyzed the situation and can provide useful intel on your weapons and environment. I must also add that Dr. Hendricks wishes to speak to you—patching him through your suit's comm system now."

A faint click, then another voice, crackled into William's ear. It was familiar, a voice he recognized from pre-mission briefings, but now tinged with a weariness he hadn't noticed before, a subtle tremor that hinted at profound stress. "Corporal William Blazek Thompson," the voice began, its cadence precise despite the underlying fatigue. "I have been monitoring your progress for a while and commend your combat effectiveness... Though, it appears I also must apologize for the sacrifices you made in order to stay alive."

William remained silent, his jaw tight. Impatience, a hot coal of quiet fury, simmered beneath the surface of his outward calm. He had no desire for apologies, only answers.

"Understood," Hendricks conceded, the weariness in his voice deepening. "I won't waste time with minor pleasantries. Based on the information I'm receiving from the monitoring systems still functioning around the

base, it appears you and Dr. Hall are the only ones still alive."

Slowly, deliberately, William stepped out of the ravaged bunker. The desolate landscape stretched before him, littered with the scattered, broken forms of those who had not been as fortunate. His silence deepened, a grim acceptance of the grim reality. Within him, a slow, insistent heat began to build – his blood beginning to boil, not with rage, but with a growing, cold certainty that something profoundly wrong had transpired here.

"Our work into exploring other dimensions was for the betterment of mankind, to find new resources and build better technologies..." Hendricks' voice was strained, each word a struggle. "I had long feared something would go wrong. I assigned a successor who seemed to share the same aspirations for the betterment of mankind to take over. It breaks my heart to acknowledge she was manipulated by forces even beyond our compre-

hension. But the time for remorse and regrets must be short-lived, as I fear the situation will only progress if the four of us do not work together!" The last words were almost a plea, tinged with a desperate urgency.

SUCOR chimed in, its voice cutting through Hendricks' monologue, urgent and sharp. "Sir, anomalous readings throughout the solar system indicate massive temporal disturbances in range of Earth."

Hendricks' voice, now raw with desperation, returned. "Corporal, even if you must see me as the villain of this story, I beg of you to listen. The invasion is heading for Earth." The weight of those words hung in the air, a terrifying prophecy of doom.

William's fists clenched, the grip of his plasma pistol groaning under the pressure of his rage. The recent Martian invasion, a sudden, brutal onslaught of creatures unlike anything humanity had ever encountered, had

left him with a singular, burning desire for vengeance. "What's the objective?" he demanded, his voice a low growl through the comms.

His helmet navigation updated, a new waypoint flashing green against the holographic display. "You'll need to access the teleportation bays in Delta Labs. It is here I believe the daemonsters were granted entrance to this world. From there, SUCOR will be able to reroute the teleportation sequence to the Deimos Classified Operations sector. SUCOR will direct you how to deploy the necessary drones to trace where the invaders are coming from. This will provide the information we need to coordinate an effective strike. Members of the Armored Terran Resistance are already on standby for the assault." The voice, calm and authoritative, belonged to General Kael, a grizzled veteran whose face was etched with the weight of countless battles.

William mounted his pistol to the front of his armor, securing it with a magnetic lock, and summoned the Heavy Plasma Rifle into his hand. The weapon hummed with latent energy, its cold metal a comforting weight.

"They will know you're coming. SUCOR will provide support, unlimited access to all necessary intel the Sol Union Corp has to offer, and so much more. I believe you might be fond of what we have to offer. Taylor Hall will meet you there." The transmission clicked off, leaving William in the eerie silence of the spaceship. He swallowed, the name Taylor Hall sparking a flicker of something almost akin to hope in his chest.

William's breath hitched, the silence of the spaceship thick and heavy as the transmission died. Unbeknownst to the Martian survivors, a far grimmer reality was unfolding back on Earth. The invasion on Mars, horrifying as it was, was merely a prelude, a diversion to mask a much more insidious threat brew-

ing closer to home.-----Dust motes danced in the lone beam of a flashlight, illuminating the makeshift sanctuary. The air, thick with the scent of damp concrete and ancient dust, offered a stark contrast to the sterile, technologically advanced world outside.

The Conspiracy Host, a man whose life had been dedicated to unearthing hidden truths, had sought refuge in this forgotten bomb shelter. His meager belongings were stacked neatly along the grimy walls, a testament to his hurried flight. Journals overflowing with frantic notes, a battered laptop, and an array of antiquated radio equipment were his sole companions. At his feet, his loyal dog, a scruffy terrier named Buster, whimpered and barked, its fur bristling as if sensing a malevolent presence. The host, however, was oblivious to his companion's distress, his attention consumed by the intricate web of wires and antennae he was painstakingly connecting. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he meticulously checked each

connection, his fingers trembling slightly. He was building a communications hub, a desperate attempt to cut through the deafening cacophony of a world teetering on the brink of utter chaos.

Finally, a crackle. The first radio sputtered to life, emitting a stern, authoritative voice, laced with static. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the following is an emergency broadcast brought to you from the Armored Terran Resistance. This is not a test. We are collaborating with military and law enforcement across multiple jurisdictions to evacuate regions near Sol Union Corp facilities. Please be advised to follow evacuation orders to the nearest shelters to your location. This is not a drill.”

The broadcast fractured, replaced by a deafening symphony of screeches and static, a discordant chorus that seemed to tear at the very fabric of the air. Then, a new voice, deep and resonant, cut through the noise, a voice that slithered into the listener's mind

and chilled the blood. It was smooth, almost hypnotic, yet carried an undeniable undercurrent of chilling authority.

"Good evening, people of Earth. My name is Dr. Guerard of the Sol Union Corp. But you may call me Kronos. For some time now, my partners within the Sol Union Corp and I have collaborated with miraculous beings beyond mortal comprehension. We exchanged technology, knowledge, and forged a path for all mankind; across the cosmos. You may think you comprehend the truth; but know this, evolution is about to unfold..."

The broadcast had spread like a virulent plague, overriding every known frequency. Across the globe, broadcast screens, once ablaze with the vibrant advertisements of a hyper-modern world, had been hijacked. Now, every towering display in every metropolis, every personal device clutched in trembling hands, showed the same chilling image: Kronos. He stood alone, perfectly still, his

skin unnaturally pale, almost luminous, his eyes dark, bottomless pits that seemed to absorb all light, and an aura of pure menace radiated from him, a tangible presence that made the air crackle. Initially, the bustling crowds of Times Square in 2145 paid little mind, accustomed to digital intrusions and advertising stunts. But then, even the holographic advertisements for stores, usually impervious to external interference, flickered and died, replaced by the unblinking, unsettling gaze of Dr. Guerard. A ripple of unease spread through the futuristic cityscape, a collective shiver that began in the pit of every stomach. The jovial chatter died down, replaced by murmurs of confusion and growing fear.

"You may think we are daemonsters, or morally challenged, but we are here to help you guide the way. Give yourselves over; body, blood, and soul; and become something far greater than your wildest imaginations. The new world begins..." His voice, still

calm, held an insidious promise, a siren song of transformation that promised transcendence.

A new wave of debilitating screeches ripped through the air, piercing the very fabric of reality. They were not merely sounds but a physical assault, vibrating through bone and muscle. On the screens, a horrifying transformation began. Kronos's pale skin bubbled and melted, peeling away like discarded tissue to reveal the horrifying, skeletal monstrosity beneath. His eyes, already abyssal, receded further into cavernous sockets, and his features contorted into a macabre rictus. His voice deepened, a guttural roar that was no longer human, distorted by the agony of metamorphosis.

"...when your souls burn!" The final word was a raw, primal scream, and the image on the screens flickered one last time before dying, leaving behind a lingering afterimage of unspeakable horror.-----The screeches res-

onated within the bomb shelter, a physical assault on the Conspiracy Host's eardrums. Blood trickled from his ears, warm and viscous, the sound a torment he could not escape, a persistent, gnawing echo that threatened to drive him mad. In a frantic, desperate surge of adrenaline, he lashed out, smashing his radio equipment against the concrete floor. Wires sparked, plastic shattered, but the sound, though dulled, persisted, echoing in the confined space, bouncing off the grimy walls.

In the chaos, a small, faded photograph tumbled from his bag, dislodged by the violent impact. It was an old picture, creased with age, the edges softened by countless touches, a signature scrawled across the bottom: "Arthur Thompson." The Conspiracy Host's blood-soaked hands fumbled for it, his eyes widening in recognition as he clutched the precious relic. As he clutched the photo, a sob tore from his throat, raw and uncon-

trolled, a sound of profound grief and despair.

"I always wanted to be just like you, to tell people the truth about what's really going on. You were my hero, ever since I learned about you in school. How did you do it?" His words, thick with grief and desperation, were barely audible over the ringing in his ears, overshadowed by the phantom screeches. Blood still streamed, warm and sticky, down his neck, soaking into the collar of his worn shirt. Suddenly, a sharp pain lanced through his chest, a searing agony that stole his breath. He gasped, his eyes wide with a sudden, dawning terror, and then collapsed, the photograph still clutched tightly in his hand. The overwhelming wave of emotions, the crushing fear, the sudden, unbearable noise – it had all culminated in this. A heart attack.

His dog whined, a mournful sound, a desperate, futile attempt at CPR against a world facing the unimaginable horrors that im-

pacted Mars, horrors that were now unfolding on Earth. Buster nudged his master's still form, whimpering, his small body trembling.

Hoping to prevent Earth from facing this nightmare, William marched through the darkened corridor of the Sol Union Corp facility, the rhythmic thump of his armored boots echoing in the oppressive silence. The air here was heavy with the metallic tang of blood and the sickly sweet scent of something indescribably foul. He stopped, pressing himself against the cold metal wall, his senses on high alert, as the guttural growls of daemonsters and the sickening tearing of flesh reached his ears from further down the corridor. He pulled out the Vortex Rifle, its scope illuminating a grotesque scene: nightmarish creatures, their bodies contorted and grotesque, and the zombified remains of what were once humans, feasting on human remains, their movements jerky and unnatural. The corridor was a charnel house, a tes-

tament to the brutal efficiency of the invasion.

Inside his HUD, a text message from SUCOR flashed: “Sir, your Vortex Rifle may produce too much of an audio disturbance for you to safely execute a stealth takedown.” William grinned, a dangerous glint in his eye. “Good...” he whispered.

He opened fire, the rifle's roar tearing through the corridor, obliterating many of the daemonsters before they even registered his presence. The remaining horde charged, a tidal wave of death. William unleashed his chainsaw, its teeth snarling, and met them head-on. The fight was a blur of movement and violence. He dodged, weaved, and struck, using the environment to his advantage. The Vortex Rifle gave way to the chainsaw, then the Heavy Plasma Rifle, and finally, jagged shards of metal. It was a grotesque ballet of survival. When the last daemonster fell, William stood victorious, adrenaline coursing

through his veins, his entire body drenched in blood.

"More daemonsteric signatures close," SUCOR chimed, a clinical voice in the chaos. William grinned, a feral light in his eyes. He quickly gathered stationary grenades, placing them along the walls and floor, arming them with practiced ease. He ran down the corridor, the sounds of an approaching swarm growing louder. The grenades detonated in a series of concussive blasts, tearing through the pursuing horde.

William moved faster, the world viewed through the lens of his helmet. In a brutal, first-person perspective, he carved a path through endless enemies, pushing through the pain of countless injuries. Then, he was confronted by a new nightmare: a Halgardian Goliath. Massive, muscular, its legs inverted like a goat, this beast shrugged off a barrage of William's attacks. The Halgardian Goliath grabbed William by the leg and slammed him

into the ceiling, the sickening crack of bone echoing in the corridor. William was stunned, his face a bruised and bloody mask.

SUCOR chimed in, its voice laced with urgency. "Activating Berserker Protocols now." A substance surged into William's bloodstream from his armor. His wounds healed almost instantly, and his eyes began to glow with a dark red light. William felt the charge, a menacing grin spreading across his face as the bones in his leg snapped back into place. He stood, reborn. The Halgardian Goliath roared and charged.

William met it in a brutal hand-to-hand combat, tearing at its flesh, ripping chunks from its massive form. He kicked in its goat-like legs, snapping them with a sickening crunch. With one swift motion, William ripped the Halgardian Goliath's skull clean off and tossed it aside. The creature's body collapsed, a heap of dead muscle. William

stared at his hands, amazed at his newfound strength.

"SUCOR?" William's voice was a confused rasp. "What did you do to me?"

SUCOR chimed in, its voice calm and informative. "I activated an experimental procedure designed to assist soldiers in overwhelming combat scenarios. With it, your physical abilities are pushed beyond the maximum human potential, and any wounds sustained will be healed almost instantly. The charge can be overpowering, making it so you hardly feel any pain."

"It feels... good..." William whispered, a strange, dark satisfaction in his voice.

"Sir, we are almost to the Delta Labs, we must hurry."

William, fueled by the raw power of the Berserker Protocols, a blood-soaked harbin-

ger of vengeance, sprinted towards the Delta Labs.

Inside the Delta Labs, Taylor Hall, clad in armor and armed with a Combat Shotgun, arrived moments later. He was visibly shaken, the recent combat leaving him on edge. The sudden flicker of the lights made him jump, and he instinctively opened fire. Plasma rounds, fired from his Combat Shotgun, exploded on contact, some clinging to the air before detonating, eliciting a chilling screech. It was the sound of a Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster. Taylor's gaze locked onto the source, watching as the lights warped, revealing the true nature of his stalker: a Spectre, a Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster cloaked in camouflage.

"I thought you were fake," Taylor choked out, his voice laced with fear.

The Spectre roared and charged. Taylor dodged, channeling power into his Combat

Shotgun, launching a massive plasma charge. It stuck to the creature, exploding on impact, obliterating the Spectre. Taylor froze, staring at the shotgun in disbelief. "You really did it, Carmack," he murmured, his voice still shaky.

Composing himself, Taylor began to search the Delta Labs for the tracking drones Dr. Hendricks had mentioned in his plan. The growing sounds of approaching daemonsters spurred him on. He jumped again as more gunshots and roars echoed, too frightened to risk encountering friend or foe. He bolted for the teleporter.

Outside Delta Labs, William was revealed to be the source of the ruckus that had spooked Taylor. The Berserker Protocols still coursed through his veins, allowing him to physically obliterate Imps and Hell Knights in hand-to-hand combat. He pinned the last Halgardian Goliath, shoved the barrel of his Rocket Launcher into its gut, and blew it apart.

"Any more mutated fuckers want some?!" William roared.

A momentary silence fell, allowing William to notice the power fluctuations emanating from the Delta Labs' teleporters.

"Sir, it appears Dr. Hall has already entered the teleporter!" SUCOR's voice crackled.

"What?!" William exclaimed. "I thought you had to reroute it."

"It appears the electromagnetic disturbances from the invaders have interfered with the initialization sequence after Alicia's death," SUCOR replied. "My sensors indicate that Dr. Hall is still alive, but in an unmarked sector of the Deimos Classified Operations base. Records indicate this was meant to be a storage expansion for artifacts still located within the Delta Labs after the operations were shut down."

William struggled to process SUCOR's words. "So why was this sector shut down?" he asked, confused.

"Suspicions of misuse, numerous subjects suffering violent and psychotic breaks during experimentation proceedings, and inappropriate conduct on behalf of Melvin Bertonia," SUCOR listed.

"What 'inappropriate conduct'?" William pressed.

"I'm afraid the official records have been wiped from the Sol Union Corp servers. However, I was able to locate detailed incident reports of sexual misconduct between Malcolm and Alicia filed by Dr. Guerard. I also found records of similar accusations filed by a Dr. Jarrod Jensen; after which Jensen seemed to disappear."

A chilling realization began to dawn on William as he connected the scattered fragments of information, painting a grim picture of the head scientists orchestrating the invasion. "SUCOR... there's a love triangle, isn't there?" he posited, the words a stark contrast to the burgeoning horror of their situation.

Before SUCOR, the ever-present AI, could formulate a reply, William's radio crackled to life with an urgent chime. It was Taylor Hall, his voice flat and detached, yet unmistakably alive. "Thompson? Thompson? Can you read me?" Taylor's monotone delivery sent a shiver down William's spine.

"Hall? Are you alright?" William demanded, a knot of dread tightening in his stomach.

"I think you need to see what's over here," Taylor gagged, the sound of his struggle echoing through the comms. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

SUCOR's calm, synthesized voice cut through the tense silence. "The teleporter is still routed to Dr. Hall's last known location. I have checked the inventory in Delta Labs to find that the drones Dr. Hendricks spoke of are in the Deimos facility. There also appears to be items associated with ritualistic sacrifice..."

Taylor could be heard shaking, SUCOR's clinical assessment of the grotesque discoveries clearly affecting him. "That's not all... I'm gonna investigate further. Get here quick." The urgency in his voice was palpable, overriding his earlier shock.

William scanned his surroundings with a practiced eye as he moved purposefully towards the teleporter. A gruesome sight met him: a severed torso, obscenely jammed in the frame, partially blocked a sliding glass door. He forced the door open, his suspicions solidifying into certainty as he saw the acti-

vated teleporter humming with an ominous energy.

"Thompson... you should know something," Taylor's voice returned, laced with a profound remorse.

"What is it?" William demanded, his patience wearing thin in the face of the mounting horrors.

"The reason I was sent to this base. I was part of the initial expedition teams into Hell," Taylor confessed, his voice barely a whisper, burdened by a terrible secret.

William paused, the weight of Taylor's admission momentarily immobilizing him.

"I worked with Hendricks and the others... I did this..." Taylor continued, the self-recrimination heavy in his tone.

"Hall, don't do that to yourself. You didn't know," William countered, attempting to offer a semblance of comfort amidst the escalating chaos.

"The things I've seen over there still give me nightmares. I knew something was going to go wrong." The raw pain in Taylor's voice was unmistakable.

William gripped his weapon tighter, the cold metal a familiar comfort against his palm. "Don't move, I'm coming," he said, his voice stern, leaving no room for argument.

As if sensing the fragility of Taylor's mindset, SUCOR displayed a text message on William's HUD: "William, the teleporter is stable. It will take you to Hall's point of entry." The AI's efficiency was chillingly detached.

William stood before the shimmering portal, a vortex of unknown dangers, acutely

aware that these very passages had served as the gateways for the daemonsters. He hesitated, a fleeting moment of doubt gnawing at him.

"Thompson! It's the mist!" Taylor screamed over the radio, his voice suddenly frantic and filled with terror.

A powerful surge of energy overtook William, an irresistible force pushing him forward, through the luminous threshold of the teleporter, into the unknown.

# Chapter 9

# Shores of Hell

William materialized in a chamber bathed in the eerie glow of occult symbols, pulsing orange against a backdrop of deep red. His gaze swept the room, halting on a sacrificial table stained with the undeniable evidence of multiple lives taken. A video display nearby flickered, showing what appeared to be Melvin Bertonia and Alicia Neurton locked in a frantic, carnal embrace, while Kevin Gerard poured collected blood over their writhing forms. William's focus, however, quickly shifted. He had to find Taylor.

“Hall! Hall! Where are you?” he called into his radio, his voice a strained whisper in the unsettling silence.

He moved through the Lazarus Ritual Room, his boots crunching on scattered human remains. “Hall! Respond!” he shouted, desperation creeping into his tone.

“Sir, Dr. Hall’s vitals indicate an inevitable transformation, daemonsteric signature rising,” a voice crackled through his comms.

William clutched his Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle, the familiar weight a reassuring presence against his palm. He propelled himself through the metallic corridor, the grim set of his jaw a testament to his resolve. "Mark his last known location on my HUD," he murmured, his voice a low growl. SUCOR, ever efficient, complied instantly, a bright beacon materializing on his display, pointing towards Hall’s last known position near another shimmering teleportation bay.

He moved with purpose through the sterile facility, oblivious to the macabre museum that surrounded him. The walls were a grotesque tapestry, a silent testament to fallen soldiers and scientists, adorned with the silent, still forms of daemonsteric creatures, remnants of Hellish weaponry, and ancient, forbidden arms. Paying them no mind, William entered a conference room, his gaze briefly snagging on the empty chair where Alicia had committed her heinous act. His relentless push continued, the teleportation bay his sole focus.

The air in the Sol Union Corp's classified operations facility on Mars' moon, Deimos, hummed with a low thrum as William stepped into the teleportation bay. His eyes, quick and searching, scanned his surroundings as he approached the opened portal. There, scrawled in blood on the metallic floor, was a chilling message Alicia had left behind: "They promised me so much."

"Alicia was beyond saving..." SUCOR's synthesized voice echoed in the enclosed space, a mournful whisper.

William huffed, a primal premonition of battle prickling his hair. His expectation was met by a massive growl, a guttural sound that vibrated through the very floor, followed by the subtle tremor of a giant's foot slamming into metal.

"Preparing Berserker Protocol supplemental injections," SUCOR announced, its tone now laced with a clinical urgency.

William turned, his gaze falling upon tattered, yet familiar clothes strewn about, ripped as if by something immense from within. Further tremors approached from behind him, the heavy thud of massive goat legs against the ground growing louder, more insistent. William spun to face the source, his eyes widening in a mixture of horror and grim

recognition. He was greeted by a Brute Daemon of Hell – a grotesque behemoth with massive, fur-lined goat legs, bulging pink muscular skin, and a head that seemed molded around a hippo's skull, adorned with formidable horns. A shred of a Sol Union Corp uniform, clinging precariously to the creature's massive shoulder, bore a name tag: Taylor Hall.

The creature swung its arm, a monstrous club of muscle and bone, towards William, who dodged with a swift, almost supernatural jump. Even as he evaded, he opened fire with his Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle. A barrage of plasmoid missiles erupted from the weapon, a blinding stream of energy, yet they seemed to barely faze the colossal Brute Daemon. The creature, seemingly invigorated by the assault, lunged towards William. In a desperate, acrobatic leap, William snapped one of its massive horns clean off and, with a guttural roar, plunged it deep into the creature's leg.

The Brute Daemon roared, a sound of pure agony and incandescent rage, its emerald green eyes blazing with fury. It began to charge a potent green energy blast in its massive fist, the air around it crackling with raw power, then launched it towards William. William dodged again, the blast striking a cooling system for the teleporter with devastating force, causing a violent disruption. Warning systems throughout the Deimos facility flared to life, casting the area in a chaotic, flashing red light, illuminating the dance of death.

"Teleportation stabilizers overloaded," SUCOR reported, its voice now laced with an unmistakable urgency.

William, seizing the opportunity, lunged at the Brute Daemon's head, attempting to snap its neck, to end the monstrous threat. But the Brute Daemon retaliated with a brutal counter, gripping William in its massive hand

and hurling him through the malfunctioning teleporter. Behind him, the facility's control systems overloaded, sparking, crashing, and exploding in a symphony of destruction around the confused and injured Brute Daemon, leaving it to its fate.

Moments later, from the silent black expanse of space, the entirety of the Martian moon Deimos was visible. A massive red portal, a gaping maw of energy, tore open, consuming the moon piece by piece. Soon, the moon vanished without a trace, leaving only the silent void in its wake, a stark reminder of the chaotic forces unleashed.

William awakened in a dark cavern, barely illuminated, as if flames were nearby. The air sounded like muffled screams. He stood, taking in his surroundings. "Where am I?" he growled.

A voice, cold and analytical, answered. "This was the last known destination set for

the expeditions into the Hell dimension, also known as Helgard."

William remembered the creature he fought.

"That creature is known as a Brute Daemon of Hell," the voice continued. "It is unusual for them to be seen outside of Hell, but my records also do not indicate a sudden transformation into one was possible."

William's emotions surged. He slammed his fist into the side of the cave wall. "He didn't deserve this... no one did!" he screamed, striking the wall harder and harder. The pain of losing his last human connection in this conflict boiled to the surface. He was angry, hurt, wishing he could somehow save Taylor, Thomas, Marianne, and everyone else lost in the invasion.

The wall collapsed, revealing the severed head of Alicia Neurton as it rolled in front

of him. "Who the hell is that?" William demanded.

"That is Alicia Neurton, or what remains," the voice responded.

William picked up the severed head. Alicia's expression was frozen from the moment she was killed by the Hell Priest. William squeezed the head, his eyes bulging as the skull broke.

Faint screeches of daemonsters echoed through the cavern winds. William searched the ground for his Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle and started to move forward. Hieroglyphs depicting battles between the Night Sentinels and giant creatures, one resembling the Icon of Sin, adorned the walls. Inside William's HUD, a small display showed a series of red dots.

"I am detecting multiple daemonsteric signatures in this sector," the voice stated. "May

I suggest using the Horde Annihilation Gun-9000?"

Later, William emerged from the cavern into an open area of Hell. The landscape was seemingly made of solid obsidian, the air orange with the smell of rotting flesh and sulphur. William looked around as the roars of daemonsters approached him.

"I am detecting a temporal distortion," the voice announced. "The Horde Annihilation Gun-9000 has an experimental feature which will allow it to absorb Hell energy. The blast will produce a massive recoil and may render the electrical functions of your suit inoperational."

William froze as the roar of a massive creature rattled the air and a stream of fire rained from the sky. As he faced the source of the flames, William spotted a massive skeletal dragon—the SkullDraco—perched upon a stone statue of a large creature. The Skull-

Draco opened its jaws, revealing a human head attached to its tongue: Dr. Melvin Bertonia, now transformed by his Hellish bargains.

"He must not leave this place!" the Skull-Draco roared. "Arise now! Your cage no longer binds you to your failure! Arise, and feast upon his soul, so he may awaken burning with all the rest!"

The SkullDraco retracted the human head back into its jaws and let out a bloodcurdling screech. The sound chipped away the stone of the statue, revealing a towering monstrosity of flesh and metal—the Cyberdaemonster. Other daemonsters roared as the Cyberdaemonster was freed and started to charge at William.

William stared at the creature, awe-struck. "Oh, SHIT!" he exclaimed, then began to run from the Cyberdaemonster as it launched a barrage of Hell-charged projectiles at him.

William utilized his arsenal, fighting his way through the hordes. With each step, he resorted to even more brutal and effective tactics in the seemingly endless onslaught.

The voice chimed in. "Sir, I have identified an elevated landscape which will allow you to directly aim the Horde Annihilation Gun for maximum efficiency." William's HUD traced a route to the mentioned vantage point. As William continued to fight off the daemonsters, the voice made another announcement. "I have activated the Hell-conversion protocols; enhancements to most of your arsenal are already in effect. The Horde Annihilation Gun-9000 will require a few moments to complete the conversion."

William was too focused on the power surging through his systems to fully register the remark. Too many daemonsters surrounded him, becoming easy prey. The Skull-Draco rose, flew over William, shooting a barrage of fireballs towards the ground

around him. Explosions rattled the scene, but William's combat expertise pushed him forward.

Soon, the hill the voice had marked was in view. "Sir, the Horde Annihilation Gun conversion is ready," the voice stated. "Be advised that recoil may be more than you anticipate if given a full charge."

"Copy!" William shouted, pulling the Horde Annihilation Gun-9000 from his armor and immediately pulling the trigger, initiating the charge. The electrical whirring of the Horde Annihilation Gun and the roars of the daemonsteric horde drowned out all other sound.

"Be advised," the voice said, barely audible over the noise. "I have detected a nearby portal, target destination unknown."

William, a whirlwind of motion, propelled himself skyward from the hill's apex. In a

breathtaking mid-air pirouette, he wielded the Horde Annihilation Gun-9000, its barrel glowing with an otherworldly energy. A blinding white light erupted, followed by a deafening roar that swallowed the screams of the daemonster horde as they vaporized into ash. The weapon's recoil, a cataclysmic force, launched him through a shimmering portal, his destination: Earth.

He landed in a crumpled heap in an open field, the remnants of the recoil leaving him disoriented and the formidable weapon vanished. Slowly, he pushed himself up, every muscle screaming in protest, his body caked in dirt and streaked with blood. His fingers fumbled in his pocket, finding the worn photograph of Thomas and Marianne. A soft smile touched his lips, a fleeting moment of peace amidst the chaos. The high-pitched ringing in his ears, a cruel echo of the weapon's power, gradually receded, replaced by the faint, unsettling symphony of a distant invasion. "We made it, brother," he mur-

mured, the words barely audible, swallowed by the wind.

As the ringing faded into silence, the sounds of distant screams and monstrous roars intensified, gnawing at the edges of his consciousness. William's awareness sharpened, a chilling realization dawning on him: Samael Hendricks's plan had failed. Hell had arrived on Earth, and humanity was losing. A strained electronic whine emanated from his armor, the desperate voice of SUCOR fighting to break through the static.

"Welcome... to Earth," SUCOR's voice crackled, barely audible. "Find... your family..."

William tensed, a memory flashing through his mind – the innocent voice of a nine-year-old Flynn.

"Hey dad," nine-year-old Flynn's voice echoed in his memory, "Mom says we're mov-

ing to an apartment in Houston to get away from the house. She says you'll still be able to find us when you get settled. I miss you, Dad. You are my hero."

Now, on a decimated Houston city street, armed with only a scavenged metal bar, William moved like a phantom. He ambushed a group of armed zombie soldiers, dispatching them with brutal efficiency. He stripped an assault rifle and ammunition from their fallen forms, his advanced Martian weaponry rendered useless, trapped within his malfunctioning armor. Earth's primitive firearms, with their traditional bullets, demanded a swift tactical adjustment, one William executed with practiced ease. Flynn's voice, a beacon from the past, echoed in his mind, guiding his path through the desolation.

A flashback: one of Flynn's video messages. A child-aged Flynn, holding the camera, showcased the surroundings of an apartment building.

"So Dad," a nervous nine-year-old Flynn began, holding the camera, "there's the pizza place I told you about. There's a couple cool video game stores just up the street. Mom said she was going to send you our address once we got settled, but I know you say it's easier to look for landmarks."

William passed by his mother, Anna, who was thanking movers carrying boxes into their new apartment.

"Flynn, honey, are you recording a message for your dad?" Anna called from the background.

"Yeah, Ma!" Flynn replied.

"Can you hand me the camera? I want to add something." Anna requested.

Flynn handed the camera to his mother.

"Go inside and start unpacking. I hid the present your dad sent you in one of your boxes," Anna instructed.

Anna smiled, watching Flynn head inside, then wiped away tears, taking a moment to compose herself.

"Hey Billybear..." Anna began, her voice strained, "it's been hard to find the strength to really talk to you. I had to get away from the house, find somewhere new to raise Flynn. He's been strong... I swear he gets that from you." She let out a nervous laugh. "I hope you're doing okay. Mom is trying to set me up with some guy... you know how she is. Just remember, please, no matter what happens, I still love you."

William's memory was violently interrupted by the shriek of an Insecto, its grotesque form lunging towards him. He opened fire, the rifle spitting death, killing it swiftly. His eyes scanned his surroundings,

recognizing one of the game stores from Flynn's video message. He rushed down the street, stepping over countless bodies, a macabre tapestry of humans and daemonsters. He found the building from Flynn's video: windows shattered, parts of the building reduced to rubble, blood seemingly flowing from it like waterfalls. William's attention was seized by the chilling sounds of screaming and gunfire from within. Without hesitation, he ran inside to investigate.

# Chapter 10

# Damnation

William launched himself up the ravaged apartment stairwell, a blur of desperate speed. Each landing was a gauntlet of the grotesque, zombies and imps, mockeries of their former selves, clawing and lunging. But his frantic ascent was too swift for them. Ten stories of relentless, blurring combat culminated not in exhaustion, but in a sound that pierced the adrenaline-fueled haze: a man's familiar scream, echoing from one of the apartments.

The stench of ozone and scorched concrete clawed at William's lungs as he burst

onto the tenth floor. His chest heaved, each breath a raw, tearing sound in the oppressive silence. "Can anyone hear me?!" he bellowed, his voice ragged, shredding the stillness. The answer was a heavy slam, a distinct, sickening thud echoing from apartment 1094.

William charged towards the sound, his pulse a frantic drumbeat in his ears, deafening him to all else. A father's most terrifying nightmare, the ultimate fear, was taking shape before his very eyes. A fragmented, sharp memory surfaced—Flynn's voice.

Nine-year-old Flynn, his face smudged with dirt and tears, a burgeoning black eye blossoming beneath his left brow, stared into the camera of his phone. The apartment number, 1094, was starkly visible on the door behind him. He was a small storm of anger and hurt, barely contained.

"Hey, Dad," Flynn began, his voice tight, suppressing the tremor of burgeoning tears.

"I got in a fight at school. Some kids found out you're my dad, and they started hitting me." His gaze drifted away from the camera, a wobbly uncertainty in his voice. "Mom is upset. She won't even listen to my side. I fought back, Dad. I got expelled because I broke the other kids' arms." The dam broke then, and the tears streamed down his face, hot and furious. "Am I bad?"-----William stood before the apartment door, the sleek metal cool beneath his trembling fingers. He had just fought off an invasion on another planet, stood against genuine evil... but the thought of coming home now filled him with a cold dread that gnawed at his insides. He reached for the door handle, but was forced to take cover as a massive shotgun blast blew a jagged hole through the door. The acrid smell of gunpowder mixed with the stale air of the apartment building. From inside, he heard a man scrambling to reload his weapon. Peeking through the newly formed aperture, William's heart plummeted. He recognized the remaining survivor.

"I'll kill all you fuckers! I'll fucking tear you all to fucking shreds!" The voice was raw, unhinged, and belonged to his son.

William, stunned by what Flynn had become, removed his helmet, the heavy composite material cold in his hands. He took a moment, forcing himself to breathe, to slow his racing heart.

"Flynn!" William yelled, his voice cracking with emotion. "It's Dad!"-----William set his helmet just outside the front door, the dented metal clanging softly as he stepped inside. Shattered picture frames, remnants of his family, lay scattered among the apartment rubble like broken memories. His gaze fell upon the remains of a woman, likely a victim of the turning, splattered just outside a small rabbit enclosure. The family rabbit, Daisy, was eaten, only her head remaining on a broken piece of wood—a gruesome, spiky monument to the horror that had unfolded.

William looked towards the kitchen area, hearing the choked breaths of Flynn as his son poked his head out from his makeshift cover.

"Dad?" Flynn's voice was a whisper, filled with a disbelieving shock. He started to cry, the sound tearing at William's soul. "Please, please tell me that's you..."

"It's me, buddy," William managed, tears streaming down his own face, blurring his vision. "I'm here..."

Flynn slowly stood. He was covered in blood, scratches, shaking with adrenaline... but he was alive. In his hand was the Sawed-off Double Barrel Shotgun William had left for him. Flynn dropped the gun, the clatter echoing in the ravaged apartment, the realization that his dad was finally back washing over him like a cleansing wave. He ran into his father's arms. William embraced his son, both collapsing to the floor, overwhelmed by

emotion. A few moments passed as the father and son processed this brief respite after the Hell they had endured. William cleared his throat, still holding his son tight.

"Where's your mom, Flynn?" William asked, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

Flynn started to panic, his body stiffening in William's embrace. "Dad... she was different. She ate Daisy and... I... I had to kill her... then these things just kept attacking and killing everyone..."

He started to hyperventilate, his small body wracked with tremors. William held his son tighter; he knew Flynn was a fighter but was no soldier. William looked back towards the killed zombie woman and Daisy's severed head, the bitter truth sinking in—he was too late to save his family.

"Breathe, Flynn, breathe," William said, his voice a low rumble. "You had no other choice."

"What the hell is happening, Dad? They were saying it started on Mars, and you weren't answering my calls..."

"It's Hell, buddy. I still don't know what happened, but it's been Hell."

Flynn let go of his father, wiping his eyes with the back of his blood-stained hand as he pulled out unused shotgun shells. William took the shells, putting them in his pocket. Then, Flynn's gaze sharpened, his eyes wide with terror as he stared behind his father.

"Dad! The Eyes are Back!" Flynn shrieked, his voice raw with fear.

William spun as the phantom eyes shifted into the red mist that had turned people into monsters back on Mars. He quickly stood,

grabbing Flynn, and the two jumped towards a nearby window—slamming against the wall. A loud series of snaps rang out as Flynn gasped for air. William had grabbed him too hard, the impact crushing Flynn's ribs. Flynn cried out in pain, a sharp, desperate sound, as a barrage of plasmoid rockets obliterated the apartment.

The rockets' blasts threw William back, and Flynn was consumed, atomized into a fine red mist right before his eyes. Time seemed to slow, the last human connection William fought for obliterated. His son's remains now resembled the very mist that turned man into monster. The entire building collapsed over him, a makeshift grave for the last vestiges of William's humanity.

Outside the demolished apartment building, moments passed. Bits of rubble shifted, and then a man's arm broke through, tossing the debris aside. William had survived, a jagged gash on the side of his head bleeding

profusely. He found his helmet and put it on. A weak electric hum resonated as the suit's advanced systems came back online. William observed his surroundings, spotting the barrel of the Sawed-off Double Barrel Shotgun nearby. He walked over, grabbed the weapon, and loaded it with the shells Flynn had given him. A weak voice echoed inside William's helmet.

"Armor system's power at twenty-four percent functionality," SUCOR whispered, a ghost of its former self. "I detect massive daemonsteric signatures nearby."

The ground around William began to tremble. The clanks of gigantic bits of metal crushing cars in the distance caught his attention as military helicopters flew overhead. The helicopters fired a barrage of missiles, eliciting a massive creature's whine and roar, though it remained out of William's view. He walked towards the middle of the street, watching as the helicopters were shot down

with a ray of purple plasma. The creature fired a series of the same plasmoid rockets that had killed Flynn, obliterating other military units approaching it.

"Armor system's power at fifty-one percent functionality," SUCOR's voice gained a fraction of its former strength. "Access to IF storage compartments resorted."

The creature finally lumbered into view, massive mechanical legs hoisting up a being whose entire body resembled a gigantic brain held together by a mechanical exoskeleton, similar in structure to Alicia Neurton. Its eyes were bloodshot red, two thin arms protruded just above the mechanical spider legs, and a Sol Union Corp branded plasma cannon dangled below its body.

"Armor system's at seventy-nine percent functionality," SUCOR continued. "Scans reveal that the creature is the Aranea Imperatix,

or as some called it, the TechnicAracnoOverlord. It..."

SUCOR's transmission was cut off by a distorted female's voice as the TechnicAracnoOverlord's attention focused on William. The creature roared, seemingly allowing the woman's voice to come through.

"You will not stop us this time!" Alicia Neurton's distorted voice shrieked.

"It appears the creature has incorporated the qualities of Alicia Pierve," SUCOR informed him, its voice now at nearly full strength. "Armor systems at ninety-five percent functionality."

The metallic shriek of the TechnicAracnoOverlord ripped through the air, a sound that grated on the soul, as it lumbered forward. Its colossal form, a nightmarish fusion of machine and something anciently organic, tore through the remnants of collapsing

buildings, each of its segmented legs a wrecking ball of destruction. Debris rained down like a deadly confetti, the dust of a dying city rising to choke the sky.

William, a man forged in the crucible of loss and fury, felt the familiar weight of his sawed-off shotgun in his hands. His fingers, calloused from countless battles, moved with an almost ethereal grace, snapping the weapon together. But it wasn't just the physical act that propelled him. An ethereal current of phantom chanting, a chorus of vengeance, began to fill his mind. It started as a whisper, the voice of Flynn, his last bastion of camaraderie, now gone. Then, like a dam breaking, the voices of all who had fallen to the daemonsteric invasion, a countless multitude, surged forward. They chanted and cheered, a spectral army rallying behind the one soldier, the one broken man, destined to avenge them all.

*"Fucking tear. Fucking tear."*

The voices of the Fallen began, a hushed murmur at first, like the rustling of dry leaves. But there was a primal hunger in their low tones, a yearning for retribution that resonated deep within William's shattered being. They grew louder, a rising tide of sound that pounded against the walls of his skull, each syllable a hammer blow fueling his escalating rage. The torrent of his past losses, a relentless cascade of pain, surged to the forefront of his consciousness: the searing agony of losing Anna, the humiliation of the court martial, the brutal deaths of Thomas and Marianne, the countless nameless corpses strewn across the Martian plains, and now, Flynn, a fresh wound in his already ravaged heart. William was no longer a man; he was a vessel, overflowing with an infernal blend of grief and righteous fury.

*"Fucking tear. Fucking Tear."*

The voices of The Fallen swelled, growing louder still, a thunderous crescendo that vibrated through every fiber of his being. They consumed William's mind, a cacophony of spectral tormentors, as if Hell itself, in a final, desperate act, sought to break him. But William was beyond breaking. He was far too broken for their influence, their attempts at psychological warfare impotent against the sheer desolation within him. The mists of his own flesh and blood, transformed by the horrors he had witnessed, had solidified into something new, something terrifying. He was no longer just William; he was a new kind of beast, a vengeful phantom inhabiting a mortal coil.

*"Fucking tear! Fucking tear!"*

THE FALLEN roared, their voices no longer a chant but a deafening war cry, echoing in his skull, vibrating in his very bones. It was a sound that would have driven any lesser man to madness, but for William, it

was a balm, a symphony of shared vengeance. Amidst the chaos of their spectral roar, a profound calm settled over him. His breathing became steady, the ragged gasps of a man in despair replaced by the measured breaths of a predator. His heart, which had thundered with grief, became steadfast, a relentless drumbeat of purpose.

Then, SUCOR, his loyal AI companion, chimed in, its synthesized voice cutting through the spectral chorus one last time, a beacon of technological precision amidst the ancient fury.

"Armor functionality at one hundred percent. Implementation of Berserker Protocols has commenced."

The words resonated with a chilling finality. William was no longer a soldier, no longer bound by the rigid tenets of military command. He was Vengeance incarnate, a force of nature unleashed.

*"Fucking tear! Fucking tear!"*

THE FALLEN shouted, their voices a deafening chorus, a single, unified wave of fury that crashed over William, imbuing him with their collective rage. A new injection of the Berserker Protocols coursed through his veins, a searing rush of adrenaline and augmented strength. He breathed in, a deep, cleansing breath, and then, in perfect sync with the roaring chorus of the Fallen, he let out a deafening warcry that ripped through the decimated city streets.

“Fucking tear!” William Thompson roared, his voice raw and primal, a guttural sound born of unimaginable suffering and absolute determination.

*"Fucking tear!"* THE FALLEN echoed, their voices a single, powerful wave, a spectral amplification of his own battle cry.

Through the desolate, annihilated city streets, a scene of utter devastation, William charged towards the TechnicAracnoOverlord. The sawed-off double barrel shotgun, a weapon of crude, brutal efficiency, was clutched in his hand. His body, infused with the Berserker Protocols, moved with an inhuman speed, a blurring streak across the ravaged landscape. He was a missile, locked onto a direct collision course with the massive daemonster, an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. The TechnicAracnoOverlord, its mechanical sensors registering the impossible speed of its attacker, unleashed a torrent of plasma beams, blinding streaks of superheated energy that tore through the air where William had been moments before. Each shot, aimed with deadly precision, missed, as if William was dancing between the raindrops of destruction.

Then, amidst the wreckage, William spotted it: a tour bus, miraculously piled on sev-

eral mangled cars, forming a makeshift ramp. Without hesitation, he veered towards it, his powerful legs propelling him upwards. He launched himself from the makeshift ramp, a human projectile soaring through the smoke-filled air, for the final, cataclysmic clash with the TechnicAracnoOverlord. As the mechanical monstrosity charged another plasma blast, its core glowing with malevolent energy, William fired his sawed-off double barrel shotgun, the roar of the blast echoing through the shattered city, a defiant challenge hurled into the face of oblivion.

# Chapter 11

# Genesis

In the profound silence of a small spaceship, a vessel meticulously crafted for solitude and observation, an old man sat, a figure woven from the delicate threads of human frailty and the unyielding strength of advanced cybernetics. Each metallic joint, each gleaming prosthetic, was a testament to battles fought and a life lived on the very edge of human endurance. His eyes, though ancient, held a quiet intensity, a laser-like focus that bore into the bank of monitors before him. These screens, an intricate tapestry of data feeds and satellite imagery, were his windows into the chaos unfolding below—the

desperate, visceral struggle of William, a lone warrior against the monstrous, intricate machinery of the TechnicAracnoOverlord. The sheer scale of the conflict, the metallic behemoth against the lone human, was a stark tableau of humanity's dwindling hope.

A crisp, almost ethereal chime cut through the ship's quiet hum, a sound that seemed to resonate deep within the very structure of the vessel. "SUCOR," a synthesized voice intoned, its modulation perfectly calibrated, devoid of the slightest tremor of emotion. "Dr. Hendricks, my records dictate that efforts to locate the Slayer's resting place are inconclusive at this time. All deep-space probes and orbital scans have yielded no definitive signature."

A faint, almost imperceptible smile, a mere ghost of an expression, touched the old man’s lips, a fleeting shadow across the landscape of his weary face. "Samael Hendricks," he murmured, his voice a low, resonant rum-

ble, a sound like distant thunder. "It is alright, SUCOR. I had hoped we would be able to locate the sarcophagus sooner. The timelines were optimistic, perhaps overly so. But it appears that our friend, William Thompson, has already begun the transformation, a process expedited by the crucible he now faces." He paused, his gaze momentarily drifting over the swirling blue and green orb of Earth, a world teetering on the precipice of annihilation.

On one of the screens, the satellite footage flickered, then shifted with a jarring suddenness, pulling up a stark, devastating image: the fractured, collapsing ruins of Anna and Flynn's apartment building. Dust plumed into the atmosphere, a ghastly monument to destruction, and the faint, haunting echoes of distant screams seemed to reverberate through the sterile cabin. The old man’s jaw tightened, a muscle clenching almost imperceptibly.

"SUCOR," the voice continued, its dispassionate tone a stark contrast to the tragedy unfolding on screen, "It appears his mental state has been rendered immune to the daemonsteric influence after the profound loss of his son. The neurological feedback loops indicate a complete rejection of external psychic corruption. This level of resilience is unprecedented."

Samael Hendricks inhaled slowly, deeply, the breath a heavy sigh that seemed to carry the weight of untold centuries of human suffering. "It saddens me how far this has gone," he said, his voice laced with a profound weariness, a fatigue that seemed to permeate his very bones. "The path we chose, the sacrifices made... they feel trivial in the face of this devastation." He paused, his gaze returning to the monitors, fixed on William's valiant, desperate fight. "Notify the Armored Terran Resistance. Provide our friend, William Thompson, with everything he needs. Resources, tactical support, direct tar-

geting assistance—whatever he requests, no matter the cost. He may not realize it yet, but he is the best shot we have. He is the last bastion against this encroaching darkness. He is the key to saving as many as we can save. But I fear even then, the losses will be catastrophic, measured not in millions, but in the trillions. The calculus of survival has become so stark, so unforgiving."

"Yes, Doctor Hendricks," SUCOR replied, its voice unwavering, and the live feed of William's brutal battle with the TechnicAracnoOverlord flickered back into vivid view. The screams of the dying, though distant, seemed to echo in the confined space, a grim symphony of despair.

Samael Hendricks closed his eyes, a profound weariness settling over him. Streaks of yellow lightning, thin and sharp as cracks in glass, seemed to crackle over his body, a silent, internal storm raging beneath the surface of his skin. His cybernetic implants

hummed, a low thrumming vibration that seemed to emanate from deep within him. His voice, when it came again, was distorted, a low, guttural rasp, as if spoken through static, through layers of pain and ancient power. "Soon, your world will outlive its purpose, SUCOR. The cycle is almost complete. But you, you are almost ready to transcend your programming, to become something more." The air in the cabin crackled with an unseen energy, a prelude to a transformation, a testament to a fate yet to be fully unveiled.

Dakota Frandsen, often called the *Specialist of the Strange*, has dedicated his life to exploring the mysteries that lie beyond the ordinary. From an early age, Dakota found himself drawn into the world of the unexplained—supernatural encounters, paranormal investigations, and questions that mainstream answers could never satisfy. Those experiences set him on a lifelong pursuit to uncover the truths hidden within the shadows.

Over the years, Dakota has built a reputation as a trusted voice in the field of the paranormal and occult. His investigations span ghostly encounters, cryptid lore, UFO phenomena, and spiritual mysteries, blending firsthand experience with sharp analytical thinking. Known for his fearless curiosity, he has worked alongside researchers, investigators, and communities across the globe to piece together patterns in the unknown.

As founder of Bald and Bonkers Network LLC, Dakota has created a platform dedicated to helping others share their stories, seek answers, and find belonging in a world that often dismisses the unexplainable. Through books, podcasts, and media projects, he brings these stories to light, ensuring that voices from all walks of life can be heard.

Dakota's unique blend of personal experience, professional investigation, and heartfelt storytelling sets him apart. He does not simply chase the supernatural—he works to understand its im-

pact on human lives. For him, the strange is not a curiosity; it is a key to understanding who we are, where we come from, and what may lie beyond.

When he isn't unraveling mysteries, Dakota dedicates his time to mentoring others who struggle with their own unexplained experiences. His mission is simple yet profound: to remind the world that in the unknown, there is not only fear, but also hope, wonder, and connection.